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*Unrequited Love*

**and other stories**



*Maxim Gorki*

# UNREQUITED LOVE

and other stories

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*With an introduction by*

ALAN PRYCE-JONES

*Translated from the Russian by*

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# Contents

|   | <i>Page</i> |
|---|-------------|
| <i>Frontispiece : Maxim Gorki, at the period when he wrote these stories.</i> |             |
| BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE   | vii         |
| INTRODUCTION BY ALAN PRYCE-JONES  | ix          |
| UNREQUITED LOVE   | 3           |
| THE STORY OF A NOVEL  | 53          |
| AN ENIGMA   | 79          |
| THE STORY OF A HERO   | 113         |
| A SKY-BLUE LIFE   | 147         |



# Maxim Gorki

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Maxim Gorki—his real name was Alexei Maximovich Peshkov—was born in Nijni-Novgorod, now called Gorki, in March 1868. From the age of five Gorki had to work hard for his living. He started writing in local papers under the pseudonym of Yegoudil Khlamida, but his first short story, *Makar Chudra*, was published in Tiflis under the name of Maxim Gorki. At twenty he tried to commit suicide, and the lesion then inflicted on his lung was no doubt the cause of the tuberculosis from which he suffered all his life.

In 1893 he was removed from his job of railway guard to a fortress near Tiflis as a political prisoner, having taken the revolutionary path that he was never again to leave. His fame as a mouthpiece of the under-dog had already become universal. In 1906, having spent several months in a St. Petersburg fortress, he went abroad, met Lenin in London, and formed with him the close relationship that was never to falter. Gorki returned to Russia at the outbreak of war, and during the first years of the Revolution all his efforts were directed to safeguarding cultural values.

Later his illness forced him to seek the sun, and he finally retired to Sorrento in the Bay of Naples, where he lived for nine years and wrote, among other works, the stories in this volume. In 1933, he returned to Russia, unable to resist the nostalgic longing to be in his own country and participate in the political experiment in which he had a true revolutionary's faith. His books had an enormous distribution—over thirty million—and his influence over younger writers was unparalleled. He died in June 1936 of double pneumonia.



# *Introduction*

BY ALAN PRYCE-JONES

There is one sentence in these stories which gives a clue to the kind of pleasure they offer :

" All this," mused Mironoff, " would be quite impossible in Paris. One isn't allowed to drive goats through the streets of Paris. And people don't chuck chickens' heads out of their windows "

In Gorki's world, such things happen all the time. And what makes it so satisfying to read about, is just that it is so utterly unlike the imaginative world we know: the world which has Paris as its centre.

The fatigues of Western Europe have become painfully familiar during the last century. From S  nancour to Jean-Paul Sartre we have been brought to see ourselves, over and over again, in the distorting mirrors of resignation or despair; and when the physical exhaustion of two wars is added to an unique lassitude which (on the evidence of books alone) is easily accepted as the outward sign of a civilized community, it is refreshing to see what has been made of the modern world by peoples who have been forced into touch with it later than ourselves.

Therefore the propagation of Marxism in Russia during the 1880's (when Gorki was both young and hungry) acts as a watershed in the flow of pre-war fiction. It cuts off the slow stream we know, moving through an orderly succession of locks, from an angry flood. And since both have met in the same river-basin, it is essential for us to trace each current of the flood-waters now pouring beside us.

For this, Gorki is a wonderful guide. He lets his eye fall, not on the sunlit, argumentative landscape of Turgenev, not on the dustier, more touching humanity of Chekhov, certainly not on Tolstoy's vast struggle with God; but on the street-corner. And a very strange street-corner it is, revealed by the lights of England, France or Germany. To begin with, it knows no fashions. Nobody

*ever acts except from the heart. Then again, it has the least possible* social stratification. One is well enough established to be drunk every day, or so hard worked that one has to keep sober at inconvenient moments: that, at first glance, seems the main distinction between the two levels of Gorki's society. Lastly, it is a world without triviality. Everything has its significance, and the aim of the story-teller is simply to point out, with the added clarity of an artist's vision, the points of significance which hold up the sagging edges of ordinary lives.

How ordinary they are! Other writers who, as it were, stick their fingers into the plain dough of life, can seldom resist pulling up a plum, even digging for the plum like children cheating over the silver sixpence in a Christmas pudding. Their heroines, as if by chance, are almost always more gifted, or prettier, or wittier, or more mysterious than the other girls in the same street; the men are marked out, by some carefully chosen distinction, as men to be written about. The ordinary is given an emphatic twist, the poor become poorer, the drab more grindingly threadbare than ever in life. Zola, Hardy, Balzac, Mérimée, Dostoevsky, Gissing, Maugham. George Moore—one could go on adding the names of writers, great and small, who have turned for their subject-matter to the pavements along which the whole world is walking. But as soon as they pick out a passer-by, they bring a special pair of calipers to bear upon him. They establish unexpected measurements to signalize him. They put chosen words upon his lips. Whereas Gorki merely sets down on paper the experience of us all: that the streets are full of dull-looking, hideous grumpy people, with every now and again a look on the face of one of them which needs interpretation. Gorki reflects, but never magnifies, the wavering glances from an inner light hoarded from what has become no more than a recollection of the sun; he is an expert in the fine degrees of rust imposed by life upon a human being—rust which never entirely hides the good metal beneath.

Charles Du Bos has classed him, rather surprisingly, with Carlyle among those who, with the highest mastery, "pierce to the marrow"; he sets him, implicitly, below Pascal alone. If the coupling of his name with that of Carlyle means anything, it means that Gorki belongs to the category of historian who is also a story-teller. Certainly there is no real difference of method between Gorki's fiction and his autobiographical books: even his magnificent port-

*rait of Tolstoy is cast as though it held the notes for an epic novel. The stuff of all Gorki's writing is life itself: and not in the form of plain literary realism but as a concentration of force leading towards what, in a letter to Chekhov, he called "a quickened, brighter life" for mankind in general. To this end, both the fictional and the real are equally subdued. Gorki uses the stuff of life as a doctor uses serum: he injects enough into the reader to harden him against the infections which attack his own weakness. No writer was ever more seriously "engaged"; none less pre-occupied with the problems of pure literature.*

So, at least, he believed. But there is plenty of evidence, from his own correspondence, that when it came to the point the artist in him always triumphed over the public man. During the Kerensky period, Gorki wrote, in answer to accusations of political unreliability:

"For seventeen years I have considered myself a Social-Democrat, and have served as much as I could the great purposes of that party. At the same time I did not deny my services to other parties, unwilling to spurn any vital cause. I have never sympathised with people who become fossilized and petrified under the pressure of the faith they confess . . . I shall say more: in every group and party I regard myself as a heretic. In my political views there are, most likely, a number of contradictions, which I cannot and do not want to reconcile."

And again, in conversation with one of his biographers, Alexander Kaun:

"Alexei Peshkov has been unreservedly at the disposal of Maxim Gorki. On numerous occasions Peshkov yielded to Gorki and made sacrifices. But there abides a third self in me, and that is the Russian, who cannot help reacting to his environment. This self, of course, caused the other two much trouble and suffering."

Such pronouncements occur again and again. And though it is perfectly just to consider Gorki chiefly as a proletarian writer, though his friendship with Lenin and his active adherence to the ends of the Revolution have never been in doubt, it is proper to insist that the significance of Gorki lies in his constant perception that the Revolution was a means to an end, not (as younger men sometimes came to think) an end in itself.



It has not been enough noticed that when differences of opinion with Lenin took place—as often they did—they were always those which must happen when an artist tries to collaborate with a pure politician. It is much to Gorki's honour that he never allowed his opinions to be deflected by political pressure: indeed, he was closest to party orthodoxy in 1919, when the prospects of the party were at their darkest. But politics was never his game. He knew himself above all to be a writer; and secondarily to be a writer with an active social conscience. Conscience, however, did not give directives; it was simply a necessary element of his art.

To show that his art was often laboured, often obscured by propaganda, is easy. How should it not be? For Gorki, after his early triumphs in the 1880's, was committed to the Revolution, and therefore to exile. His art never had a moment in which to choose its own path without external considerations, for he was forced abroad from 1906 until early in 1914, and furthermore he was regularly under police supervision. What wonder, then, that an endless argument was set in motion between Gorki the writer and Gorki the idealist—an argument occasionally to the detriment of both? Even when the years of scheming and plotting were crowned with success, writer and idealist, far from being able to put the young liberties of the republic to a congenial purpose, became engaged together in a task which, if better rewarded, was not less demanding: that of rescuing and cherishing the values of a Russian civilization sharply threatened by the chaos of the times.

"During the two revolutions and the war," he wrote after the Winter Palace had suffered from peasant thoughtlessness in 1919, "I have observed hundreds of times this dark, vindictive yearning of people to break, mutilate, destroy and vilify what is beautiful." It was naturally not things only which required his active intervention. People were also in need. Now it was Alexander Blok who ought to be given a permit to go to a foreign sanatorium; next four Grand Dukes had to be saved from execution; musicians, scholars, teachers, other writers were all the time in danger from starvation and forced labour. Blok died too soon; the Grand Dukes were shot by Zinoviev before Lenin's reprieve could reach them; disappointment, added to ill-health and hunger, made Gorki's enormous task still harder. But before his own collapse in 1921, and his eventual departure to the Black Forest and then to Italy, he had at least the satisfaction of seeing that official

recognition had been bestowed upon his aims, that his friendship with Lenin (which had been much tried by Gorki's obstinate maintenance of an individual standard of political conduct) was restored, and that a welcome—if only a conditional welcome—was gradually being offered by the workers to the intellectuals whom hitherto they had despised.

Gorki was now in his fifties, and throughout the next decade his home was at Capo di Sorrento. It was here that he wrote the stories in this book, aided by Baroness Budberg, who after devoted labour as his secretary, has now had the recompense of herself turning them into the racy and vivid English they require; and it is against this arduous background of ill-health and political idealism and sheer hard work that they must be read.

I find them doubly astonishing in their context. For not only have they the stamp of mastery, but they represent a strange break with the past. One might have expected Gorki, at the summit of his maturity but only suddenly released from ten years and more of public service, to turn directly to the Revolution for his themes. There was so much time to be made up, so much experience to be sifted, above all—perhaps—so many sermons to preach. For Gorki never hesitated to make improving deductions from first-hand experience.

But he did none of these things. He moved his characters into a Russia as nearly as possible timeless: his most imaginative use of the Revolution, *An Enigma*, harked back to the unsuccessful attempt of 1905; from his Italian villa—a curiously lax and brilliant setting for such sombre and masculine talents—he saw the immediate Russian past, it seems, only as one fragment of an immense continuity. And when he focused his attention full on contemporary events, it was in the bitterly ironical terms of *The Story of a Hero*: a story which has the unusual property, in revolutionary literature, of being reversible. Its events are equally applicable to either side; to either side its warning is sharp, its comment on the facts alike threatening.

The first story in the book, *Unrequited Love*, sets the tune for the others. It recalls the Russia of Bunin or Leskov, the Russia which Gorki himself calls "the Aeolian harp of the world." That rustiness of which I have spoken, the slow corrosion of men and women exposed to the normal weather of life, is simply set down plain. Nothing could be more ordinary, more calm in the telling.

And for that reason it is perhaps the most moving story in the book. But even elsewhere, though the people in the stories constantly lose their tempers with one another, though they yell "Pig!" and "Scoundrel!" across the room on the lightest pretext, the calm of Gorki himself is never ruffled. He tells what happened, one feels, and there is no more to be said. Only, at that particular moment the Aeolian harp had been touched by a nipping East wind.

Soon after the last story in the book was written he returned to Russia, at first on a short visit, but at last as the triumphal and acknowledged upholder of the classic Russian literary tradition during the 1930's. He did not, in other words, budge very far from his central faith in the purpose of the Revolution. At the same time, he never lost touch with the West. He remained a writer who had discovered literature through the Goncourts (appropriately enough by reading *Les Frères Zemganno*); had been visited in Capri by Rilke; had known, and known well, the work of writers as different as Romain Rolland and Ben Hecht. He kept the rich duality in mind with which he had been endowed from the start: on the one hand, an eager desire to help the Socialist state into being without discarding either the values or the graces which kept alive the vitality of parallel civilizations; on the other hand, an affectionate curiosity about mankind which bubbled to the surface whenever it could. As he wrote about his own creations: "I am not quite certain of my own sentiments: do I wish these people to become different? . . . I am sure that by their fancifulness, by the unexpectedness of their twists, by the significant form, so to speak, of their thoughts and feelings, the Russian people are the most grateful material for an artist."

And in the end it is as a painter of the Russian people that he deserves remembrance: a painter who has nowhere worked better than in this volume of stories. His political work has, by now, little to offer except the force of an example, since most of it has been submerged by the events of the last ten years. Still, whenever the place of the writer in society is under discussion, that example is bound to be raised, and unlikely to be condemned. And for those who prefer their literature free from political argument there is enough, in his works, of first-rate story telling to ensure him a place among the masters of his own time.

# UNREQUITED LOVE



## Unrequited Love

N EARLY every time I passed Theatre Mews, I saw a man at the door of a small shop, tucked away in the wing of an old wooden house, a man who seemed to be out of place and unwanted in this narrow, dark chink of the town with a streak of dusty sky over it. He either sat by the door on a chair, reading the paper, or stood leaning against the door-post, his hands folded on his chest. A small signboard over his head proclaimed in black, uneven letters that *Stationery* was sold in the shop. Packets of envelopes, writing-pads and collections of old stamps on squares of cardboard were displayed behind the dim panes of the window. Sometimes I would stop as if to examine the poor, dusty faded ware, but really so that I could covertly observe the shopkeeper as he peered intently at the windows of the house opposite—an old brick box, battered with the years, with a sinuous crack in the wall and with two rows of dim windows, four in each row. Their cornices were covered with pigeon droppings; so was the rusty inscription over the windows of the ground floor:

### TAILOR MUCHNIK

This house had probably been standing there for more than a hundred years. The whole mews consisted of two dirty lines of such old houses, tightly wedged against each other.

The man wore a long, very shabby frock-coat; under it one sensed a lean but well-proportioned body; the feet were shod in down-at-heel shoes, but one knew at once that they were small, well shaped; the face was framed by a grey, carefully trimmed beard; the grey hair on the elongated skull was smoothly brushed behind the small and clear-cut ears; the hair was probably soft; it lay close to the head, as if glued to it. There was something 'intellectual' about this hair style, but it did not harmonise with the long, dry face and it was because of this that the fine, bony nose seemed to protrude so

mournfully. The eyes of the man were strange—the eyeballs blue, the pupils a rusty colour; they were narrow and their glance cold and straight, but it seemed somehow that he was staring down into the earth.

Sometimes I stood for three or more minutes by the window, waiting for the man to ask me what I wanted, but he seemed not to notice me and stood motionless, his arms crossed on his chest, surrounded by a cloud of boredom that provoked my curiosity. What was he guarding—what was he regretting?

Schoolboys often came running to his shop to buy stamps for their collections. He let them in reluctantly, spoke to them abruptly, as though executing an alien and uninteresting task. And when I walked into his shop to buy envelopes he met me with the same unwelcoming manner, wrapped up my parcel, shortly stated the price, and crossed his arms on his chest, obviously waiting for me to go.

“Been long at this?”

“Yes.”

“An out-of-the-way spot.”

“It is.”

“Have you got some old coins, by any chance?”

“No.”

It was clear the man did not wish to talk. But suddenly my eye caught sight of a postcard—a woman in a large armchair, her mouth half concealed under a fan of ostrich feathers, her eyes smiling coquettishly, but not without irony. A provocative or very capricious face. Underneath was printed: “Larissa Antonovna Dobrinina: Famous Actress of Provincial Theatres.”

Another postcard of the same lady in the part of Ophelia, with a sheaf of flowers in her arms, but the eyes not insane at all, smiling the same enigmatic smile. There she was in “Mary, Queen of Scots,” in Ibsen’s “Nora,” and so on and so forth. The same smile on her lips—large, pouting lips, sharply separating the top of the face from the broad and rather blunt chin.

“She’s at her best—here,” the shopkeeper said impressively, pointing to the portrait in the armchair: “That is my work,” he added proudly.

“I never heard of her,” I said.

He shrugged his shoulders as though offended by my remark.

"She was very well known, however. In the front rank, I should say."

He named several towns where the actress had had 'colossal successes' and, with a tinge of contempt for my ignorance, gave me a short description of her career in a series of newspaper clichés. He spoke with his eyes shut, as though reading aloud.

"Is she alive?"

"No, she is dead."

"Long ago?"

"Nine years."

He was an unusual character, no doubt. Such people adorn the world. I decided to get to know him better, succeeded in doing so, and this is what this strange man told me:

So that you should grasp the sadness of my story, I must start it from very far back, from my childhood. My father, Klim Torsuev, a well-known soap merchant, was a man of difficult temper, a misanthropist at war with life, in spite of his wealth and success in business. Tall of stature, of exceptional physical strength, very hairy, he walked about the world with his head bent to the ground like a bull, as if he had been blinded by some terrible blow. It is possible that my mother may have been the cause of this. She was the daughter of Major Gortaloff, a hero of the Turkish campaign, and when I was nine, and my brother Kolia six, she left us, went away with a famous pianist and very soon afterwards died somewhere abroad. I remember her in the costume of a mermaid, covered with green ribbon and flowers, her dark hair falling down her back and a spray of diamonds on her head. Dressed up like that, she had asked me:

"Do I look nice?"

And when I answered, "Yes, very nice!", she rapped me gently on the forehead, saying:

"You see—and yet you don't obey me, you don't love me."

I promised to obey her, but at Easter she was gone . . .

We were sitting at a table in the corner of a small dark room; two candles in silver candlesticks burned on it, and in



an old cut-glass decanter trembled the ruby-coloured flame of wine. It was close in the room, the walls were covered with patches of photographs like grey mildew, a large armchair leant against a red-hot Dutch stove in the corner, and the man sat in the armchair, his legs outstretched, his arms crossed on his chest, watching the yellow flowers of the two flaming candles. A guitar, its handle adorned with ribbons, hung on the narrow door leading into the next room—probably the bedroom. A lamp-post in the street shone through the window, the rain pouring on it in arrows of glass. The dim, greasy light of the lamp-post, penetrating through the wet pane of the window, lit up a large painted photograph of the actress Dobrinina. The photograph stood on an easel in a black and white mourning frame, crowned with a silver wreath of palms and laurels.

There was something fusty, a kind of dry rot, about everything in the room; from all the objects emanated the strange smell that is produced by flowers preserved so long that they crumble into grey dust the moment you touch them. . . . This dry rot was to be heard even in the brittle voice of the man. His speech was empty of all intonation; he spoke as if reading aloud, the words fell automatically and easily, reminding you of the sorrowful fall of leaves from a tree, touched by frost, late in discarding its summer attire.

For eighteen years, he continued, my father lived as a widower. We never had a woman in the house except the old housemaid and the cook. He was too sullen to bother about us children. For eighteen years, what we heard mostly, Kolia and I, was his angry question: "For why?" This question frightened us; it built up a wall between him and us, and we grew up hiding from him. There were seven rooms in our flat, one darker than the other, and it was easy to hide among the various pieces of furniture. He sent me to a preparatory school, but would not allow any further studies, saying, "That's enough—on to business." But he allowed Kolia, who was more fragile, to go through a secondary school and even study mathematics and chemistry in the University. He died quite suddenly, his strength in no way undermined. One hot day in June, he came home from the church procession, drank

some iced, home-made beer, and on the fifth day was lying in his coffin, bloated, his active, hairy arms folded on a huge swollen stomach. He looked indescribably redoubtable; his angry face, with the red hair on end, was filled with such purple wrath, you know, that it seemed to me that at any moment he would hoarsely question his fate: "For why?" Work was stopped at the factory and the house was still as on Christmas or Easter holidays. But very soon an unfamiliar hustle began to spread in it: the servants moved about more noisily, spoke louder. I could see that they were pleased by my father's death and, with a sense of shame, I realised that I was, too. While he was alive, only the flies lived freely in our house and were able to buzz as loudly as they wished. Father walked about the room very stealthily, always hearkening to something or other, as if expecting something, and if a door was banged inadvertently, he would get very cross. Now, only Kolia, a sensitive youth, spoke in a semi-whisper, as he had been used to doing in father's time, and moved about just as softly as before, as though afraid to wake the man who had fallen asleep for ever.

"What a racket they are raising," he said peevishly, "as though they were glad."

"Well, Kolia," I replied, "that shouldn't upset you. You know well that he was not liked. No one liked him."

"Not even you?" he asked.

"Not even you," I said. "Let's be honest."

He remained silent, sitting by the open window, through which came the thick odour of acids, rotting fat, soap, all this accompanied by a peculiar rustling sound: our yardman, a one-eyed Tartar called Moustapha, was sweeping the ground saturated with fat which had been trampled until it had acquired the firmness of asphalt. Under ordinary circumstances, with the uninterrupted noise of the factory going on, this sound would not have been heard. It was an unpleasant, dismissing sound.

Kolia, peering out of the window, said:

"Do stop that noise, Moustapha!"

And, turning to me:

"He's sweeping away the memory of my father. Don't you

know that one shouldn't sweep when there's a body in the house?"

I tried to console him, saying:

"Now you and I will live an easier life—I with my work, you with your studies. You won't have to beg for money if you want to go and see a show, and nobody will shout at you, 'For why?'"

Maybe it was wrong of me, but I was not upset by father's death. I was no actor; I was not going to shed artificial tears.

"Don't you remember," I said, "how no more than a week ago we spent the night almost weeping with resentment and humiliation? And how many nights like that have there been?"

Looking at the sky, he said:

"How colourless and harsh the sky is. Like tin. And our factory and the whole earth are like rust and filth on the tin."

Such thoughts often came to my brother, and their oddness appealed to me. He always spoke of the earth with compassion and sorrow, as a sick man of his body. He himself was in good health, although thin and fragile, and he had such a tender girlish flush on his cheeks, you know. His hair was dark and wavy, his black eyes looked at everything with a suspicious and slightly surprised glance. He learnt to play the piano in secret from our father, and all his being had something soft and musical about it. I said to him:

"The best thing that father ever achieved in his life, Kolia, is our brotherly friendship. We owe it to his hard nature that we have drawn so close to each other; the love that binds us is a very deep one, and I want it to remain like that all our lives. Although I'm older than you, I know that I'm an ignorant fellow in comparison. Your life is a different one to mine; your thoughts are different, too, and you like the play of imagination. For instance, I would never have been able to say what you said just now about the sky. I would not know how to say it. Often I wonder what makes you say the things you do and what you mean by them."

He asked, almost guiltily:

"What do I say that's so out of the ordinary?"

"Don't interrupt me! You see, you love and cherish this earth as you do your own flesh, while I walk about it in perfect

calmness. I do not see myself as somebody else; I'm condemned to the image in which I was created. I think of nothing but the factory, the business, my fiancée. I'm afraid that you'll find this boring and this boredom might serve to part our ways. You're still a boy, not steady enough, and these times are difficult ones with the students all excited. You might be drawn into dangerous politics and that will be the end of you as it has been of so many others. You see, I love my future wife, but when I think that she will enter our lives as my wife and I will have to give up to her a part of myself, I'm afraid. What if you happen not to like her? You know how the saying goes: 'A woman in a family is like a chink in a door.' Then children may come. What about you? So I've decided to wait with the marriage, Kolia, so as not to lose you."

He answered sadly:

"I don't want any sacrifices from you."

That's exactly what he said. But I talked on and on, very convincingly, and it all ended as I wanted it to end—we embraced and swore to each other never to part under any circumstances and never to conceal anything from each other. I admit that apart from the real love I had for my brother, there was a certain amount of calculation in all this as well: for twelve years, you see, I had lived like an animal in a cage, seeing and knowing nothing but the soap business. I hardly ever went to town as my father had looked after that side of it. Kolia, in two or three years, promised to become a trained chemist and also had a streak of obstinacy in his nature, which I thought was very valuable. He read the most serious books—in foreign languages as well—talked politics, and altogether seemed to find his way in the bustle of life. I may say that life occupied his thoughts in the same measure as the factory did mine—in other words, Kolia treated life as his own business. I admit that it was even slightly comical, although the words he used were earnest enough. I realised that I would not be losing my fiancée—she was deeply in love—while I would be likely to lose my brother who was more clever and more useful to us both. But the primary thing was that I loved Kolia. . . .

The man spoke all the time on one note as though reading the Psalms, and his eyes were shut. Now he opened them. They were red, full of tears and longing.

"I loved him," he repeated. He drank a glass of wine and, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief, continued with more animation:

Up to the end of September, the beginning of the theatre season, Kolia and I lived in perfect unforgettable unison and frank exchange of opinion, although Kolia's friends began to visit him. One of them, Bogomoloff, a medical student from the seminary, was a coarse, ribald lad, you know, the all-too-intelligent kind. There are people who have a popular library in the place of a soul—he was one of them. I did not take to him from the first, for he started talking about freedom, and freedom, my dear sir, is nothing but a lost illusion. I became immediately aware of this after my father's death when the factory started to work and my life entered its inevitable path. During my father's lifetime, I was more free, although in the grip of his power, for when he died it became clear that freedom inflicts unbearable responsibility with every breath of air. But Mr. Bogomoloff maintained that man was perfectly free, that he had no one to account to for his existence, that he was the centre where everything began and ended and all the world, all life, was within him. All pure humbug. Mr. Bogomoloff\*, contrary to his name, did not believe in God, and all his clever words were more futile than the flight of a sand-martin, darting to and fro in the air trying to catch invisible flies, and in that way pursuing his aim. I tried, of course, to prove to Mr. Bogomoloff that his perfect freedom was perfect nonsense, but being a priest's son, he preached with great ability, and always got me in a corner. He seemed to me a dangerous companion for Kolia. Narrow-boned and slight, with his girlish flush, Kolia looked particularly young and defenceless by the side of this dark, long-haired priest's son. He listened to the dissertations on freedom with confidence and respect, whereas I, even then, knew well that man is not free even when asleep, that even the immobility of a stone is not freedom, for the stone exists only up to the time when it will

\* "Bogomoloff" in Russian means "Worshipper of God."

be ground into dust. Every man is the slave and captive of the various circumstances of life; the Devil, the slave of his wickedness; and God—if He exists—the slave of His actions which the mind of man cannot grasp. This is what I think of freedom. . . .

A dry, corrosive dust of sarcastic irritation seemed to fill the room as my companion uttered these words; in every word one felt the triumphant conviction of a man to whom life has granted a sufficient number of facts to justify and prove the pattern of his thoughts. Life has an inexhaustible generosity in this respect. The flames of the candles were reflected in his reddish eyes like golden sparks, and the bluish eyeballs became warmer. He raised his finely-drawn brows and an expression of self-satisfied despondency appeared on his dry face.

A bunch of dry flowers stood on a round table in a bronze vase. They seemed modelled out of some grimy material; they had an ugly shape and it was only after close inspection that I realised that they were flowers.

All my life, the man said, nodding towards them, has been centred on one single object and therefore my memory is very good. I see the past as though written on the wall.

Apart from Bogomoloff, he went on, who made a poor pun by calling himself a follower of Nietzsche\*, a young student, Pavloff, the son of the postmaster, often used to visit us. He was a more pleasant character. Small and thin, with the snout and beard of a goat, he had something clownish about him and, in order to conceal this tendency, wore golden spectacles. He was very noisy. Whatever his light hands touched, be it glass or furniture, rattled particularly loudly. He talked only of the theatre and, in spite of his obvious light-headedness, published theatre criticisms in the local papers. He knew all the actors of Russia, and when he saw the list of the new troupe of our local theatre, he was curiously exalted.

"L. Dobrinina!" he shouted. "Never heard of her before. L. — what do you think it stands for? Lydia — Louise — Laura?"

He did not succeed in getting acquainted with Larissa

\* Nietzsche—"nishchi" means "beggar" in Russian.

Dobrinina before the beginning of the season, because he fell out of a sleigh in a drunken condition and smashed his head against a lamp-post. The man has long been dead, but up to this day the thought of him evokes unpleasant memories. There are such people on this earth. Taken as a whole, they may not be so bad themselves, but being with them brings out everything bad in one. There certainly are peculiar people in Russia, as though born on purpose to make a noise about nothing. These people mostly flock around the theatre. I took tickets for the first performance for myself and Kolia. They were in the second row. Pavloff came too, his head all bandaged up. . . .

The man sighed deeply as though preparing to lift a heavy burden, drank some wine, closed his eyes again, and took a long time to fold his hands on his chest. The fingers of his hands moved oddly.

"It was a performance of 'Hamlet.' And then Ophelia appeared on the stage. . . ."

Opening his eyes, the man went on sternly:

I must explain that I don't like the theatre. It is like selling the human soul on the cheap—not a very clever display of artificial feelings—or else the ridicule of people who seem comical only because they live more simply than the others. Up to that day I had not been more than ten times to the theatre and had always left it with a feeling that somebody had wanted to deceive me but had not succeeded in doing so. I did not notice when Larissa Antonovna came on the stage, but looked up, hearing a new voice: there was Ophelia standing and looking straight at me with astonishment and such a hesitating smile. It happens sometimes at dawn that a pearly thread of sunlight breaks through a gap in the curtain or shutter into the darkness of the room so tangibly that you almost feel you could seize that dear little ray with your hand. The rays from Larissa's eyes seemed to me just as tangible. Her voice was deep, luscious, the voice of a woman, although she spoke shyly and plaintively as befits Ophelia, the girl with her love unrequited. Hamlet stood in front of her in all his caddishness, all in black like a sweep—the part was played by the well-known actor, Ajaroff. . . .

The man smiled for the first time, showing a row of strong white teeth.

"I remember a cruel little poem about that Ajaroff . . ."

And he recited, hissing through his teeth:

"As a candle of scarlet wax  
Thaws sadly from the heat,  
So does Ajaroff's audience  
Prefer to drown itself in the Volga.  
Every keen mind overturns  
From the keenness of his Kean,  
When he puts on his Kean air  
Which he has fished out from somewhere."

As he recited it, his face grew dark, and he went on slowly and softly:

I cannot express all that I went through on that night, but I may say—even if it sounds blasphemous—that I seemed to have communed for the first time with the holy mystery of beauty. These are not my own words—Pavloff was shouting them in the interval. He had a habit of speaking brazenly without paying heed to the meaning of his words. In the theatre he always behaved like a drunkard and, on that night, went about seizing people by their waistcoat buttons, sleeves, lapels, with unusual animation, in a kind of frenzy, as if he had been bribed.

"What charm! What talent! What divine beauty!"

After the madness scene, he wept and then dragged Kolia and myself to Larissa's dressing-room. There he showered words of praise on her, kissed her hands and behaved as theatrically as it is such people's custom to behave. As to myself, I saw her as I had seen her on the stage—the same smile on her face and the same sunny rays in her eyes. Her eyes were blue and calm, with a smile concealed deep inside them, and her hand was dry and hot. Listening to Pavloff, she laughed softly, not really taking his praise seriously.

"And you—what do *you* think of me?" she asked.

I thought it was me she was addressing and prepared to give a suitable reply, when I heard Kolia's soft voice:

"Oh, I think you're wonderful! Wonderful!" he repeated.

Then I realised that I had forgotten about my brother for



a while, although we were standing side by side. This confused me a lot, and Kolia's admiration filled me with anxiety. I took him away. My fiancée, the daughter of Kolia's godfather, was in the theatre. We went to her house. She was a well-educated young woman who studied in the Moscow University, and she was a great theatre-goer. She had bright pink cheeks, was pretty, healthy and gay, and very fond of sweets. She had not liked Larissa's performance.

"A woman of unusual beauty, but she can't act. She walks about the stage as though it was nobody else's business and seems to be looking for a lost brooch. . . ."

There was a certain amount of truth in that; I remembered that it had also struck me that Larissa looked down very often and seemed to walk in the wrong direction, across the others.

Kolia began to argue with my fiancée, while I, having heard a lot about the easy ways adopted by actresses, thought to myself that Kolia would surely become infatuated with Larissa and that would mean additional expense for her presents. . . .

Very sternly, as though reproaching himself, the man added:

"But the reason why I allowed this thought to cross my mind was that it served to chase another one away—oh, yes! I must beg you to recall that we had both grown up deprived of a woman's tenderness. Also, in spite of my age, I lived with great restraint for fear of contagious disease. There was a young factory girl, a seamstress, whom I . . . well . . . got on well with, but she died very soon, having been bitten by a mad dog. Around our factory there used to be many cases of hydrophobia. That's how it was with me, and as for Kolia, he was quite chaste. And it was left to me to direct his fate. Do you see?"

Then, shutting his eyes, he shook his head and said in a low voice:

"No, it wasn't that, not quite like that . . ."

And, after a silence, he continued as a doomed man, against his will:

As we drove home, Kolia smiled the whole way, wrapped in silence, and I could see that the reason for his silence was

the same as mine. On getting home, while we were having tea, we talked to each other—frankly, as usual—and I told him straight away that I was going to try and seek Larissa's favours and hoped to be successful. I said it on purpose in the coarsest of terms, but, needless to say, I had no hopes of that kind at all and never even gave them a thought. He was very angry, which I had expected, and started to talk very heatedly about a woman's beautiful soul. He talked like a book, partly in verse. I mocked him, of course, though I admired what he said and envied his eloquence. Very angry, he went to bed. I, too, tried to sleep, but in the middle of the night, got up and prayed for a long time. I was convinced then that God existed and that people's misfortunes were able to disturb Him. I prayed that all this—Larissa, Kolia's infatuation, and the torment in my soul—would vanish like a dream. It was, I remember, a moonlit night and the dogs howled loudly. . . . Well, a day later, we again went to the theatre. Larissa played the "Dame aux Camélias." It is an unpleasant play, as you know. Everything in it is calculated to move the heart with compassion. But here again, Larissa put everyone in the shade with her unapproachable beauty. In all the situations particularly meant to provoke pity, I did not believe her, but when she uttered ordinary everyday words, I remembered the criticism of my fiancée. . . . Yes, it was true, Larissa was a woman who mattered only to herself, not to the theatre. This gave me a great sense of relief. I liked the laziness of her words and movements. Only a very earnest, a very independent person could live like that. And it seemed beneath her, unsuitable, to act the part of a woman like the one with the camélias. Kolia whispered to me sadly:

"It's not her part. She's dreary in it."

In the interval, Pavloff and I went to see her, but she was changing and did not let us into her dressing-room. Through the door she asked us to come to a housewarming in her new flat which she had taken here, just across the road. . . .

The man nodded towards the window; it was an autumn day outside; the light of the lamp-post crossed by the fine glass threads of an uninterrupted drizzle, trembled and moved its yellow rays like a large fat spider.

Well, the housewarming. It was the first time in my life that I had landed among a horde of people whom I'd never seen before. The only man I knew was the police superintendent, Mametkuloff, a horseman who was himself very much like an old horse. Everything was unusual — the tables, for instance, were all placed diagonally and this crowded the room quite unnecessarily. The flowers were not put into vases, but scattered on the table, on the tablecloth. Oh, and many other things, let alone the talking. I have always wondered since at the storm of thoughts and words that breaks loose in the company of educated people, where each man obstinately tries to establish as quickly and firmly as he can his disagreement with the others. I know of nothing more irksome and futile than these talks about death, God and love. For seventeen years I have been listening without end to this prostitution of the tongue and cannot get used to it. It isn't wisdom of any sort, merely an indigestion of the brain. Pavloff was the one who made the most noise. In this crowd he behaved as the master, as an expert mechanic in a factory. A conversation took place, a very memorable one for me because of Kolia's part in it, a part which I had not expected. Larissa was the centre of attention, sitting in the corner under the ikon, in a dark red dress with flowers on her bosom, magnificent and bewitching, all aflame. Sitting by her side was the comic actor, Bragin, a very devout man who later on turned out to be a scoundrel. He had a very repellent appearance — a bony, yellow face, a snub-nose, eyes very deeply set, just like a reproduction of a human skull. It was he who started the conversation by saying what a pity it was that there had never been a play with Christ as the hero—he would have so much liked to play Christ. Larissa retorted at once: "And I would be Mary Magdalene!"

Mametkuloff intervened here, regretting that religious plays were banned from the theatre, and tried to prove at length that a people who were losing faith in God could have their faith resuscitated by the stage. In short, ideas were thrown about loosely. And then I heard Kolia's fine and excited voice—he was far away from me:

"People who believe in God are wicked and insincere."

This statement scalded me so sharply that I had to restrain

myself from shouting at him: "Shut up!" Naturally, these bold and careless words produced general indignation. Several people were up in arms, and Larissa rose in her chair in surprise, and asked:

"Why? What do you mean? Explain!"

"I can't explain," he said, "but that is how I see and feel it."

They laughed at him, of course, and Bragin began telling funny stories about the Jews. In my opinion, the baiting of Jews is greatly encouraged by actors and their anecdotes about them—they forget that the Jew is as necessary in life as salt and pepper. I have also noticed that of all people addicted to drink the ones that drink the most repulsively are actors. It is amusing and, at the same time, revolting to watch people of an artificial profession when they drop their masks, revealing their true mediocrity and emptiness of soul. So, when they had drunk enough and the natural watch that strangers usually keep over one another had abated, I asked Bragin:

"Who is Larissa?"

It turned out to my astonishment that she was a rich woman; she owned some land. Her husband raised sheep in the South. She had left him because of her love for the theatre. She had been acting for only two years, loved her work and, for the moment, was indifferent to the male sex. It both relieved and displeased me to hear this. And Bragin went on, grinning like a devil:

"If you are in any way interested in feminine charm, I would like to draw your attention to Streshneva, the vaudeville actress—a young woman, very juicy and allows freedom of movement."

"No," I said, "I am not interested, but my brother . . ."

"That's all right—she wouldn't spare her *own* brother if he had the necessary temperament."

A carriage rattled across the mews in the rain, the light from its lamps stroked the wet window-pane warmly. Then we heard the desolate rustle of raindrops again, the dreary music of an autumn night and the yellow spider of the lamp-post started again to weave its web of glass. The man stared fixedly at the window and went on softly dropping the dry

dust of words, assisting the autumn in establishing sorrow and despondency on the earth.

Realising that Bragin was a scoundrel, I of course stopped talking to him, but noticed that he winked in Kolia's direction as he walked up to fat little Streshneva and she flicked him on the nose with a flower. Kolia was ardently discussing something with Larissa, and Mametkuloff shouted at him:

"I don't understand the young who spend their time talking politics or religion—in a word, asking questions. In Paris, young men study simply or make love simply—in a word, behave in a simple, human way."

Larissa frowned and played with her fan. Her face expressed displeasure. Pavloff, shaking his goat's head, spoke like a church dignitary:

"We Russians, the Æolian harp of the world, echo every sigh of humanity."

Streshneva seized Kolia by the arm and led him away to the next room, but when, as we drove home, I asked him how he had liked this gay lady, he answered, ill-humouredly:

"She is a vulgar little fool. But you are wrong when you speak coarsely about Larissa. She is a fine person and her soul is preoccupied with serious matters."

When we got home, he spoke of her in wonderful terms. I had never heard such words before and felt sad and envious at being unable to speak of a woman with the same exaltation. And, I admit, I was afraid to think what would happen if Larissa heard all that Kolia had said.

"Why," I said, "you've only seen her twice!"

But these words were, of course, like a drop of water on a bonfire. Kolia was in love. He became an habitu  of the theatre and a close friend of that "Nietzsche" Bogomoloff, who now walked about our flat day after day, shaking his mane of hair, croaking and croaking. He borrowed money from Kolia, to whom I had assigned one hundred roubles a month for expenses. I saw, of course, that all this would bring Kolia to no good.

The man rose, walked to the door, stopped there, and for a moment stared blindly at the guitar.

"This instrument belonged to Larissa, but she played it badly."

Then, with a hopeless gesture of the hand, he returned to the table, drank a glass of wine and sank back listlessly into the chair.

I decided to talk to him as a brother, he went on.

"Do you remember," I said, "how we swore after father's death never to conceal anything from each other?"

And suddenly I heard the answer of a stranger, the answer of an enemy:

"Yes, I remember. I guessed already then that you wanted to take father's place and force me to live according to your laws. I will have nothing like that. But I was too weak then to say it to you. Now I will do so: I hate our putrid factory; I'm ashamed to see our workmen living in filth, poisoned with one thing or another. The papers wrote only the cruel truth about us . . ."

He spoke uninterruptedly for about half an hour, with all the eagerness of youth and ignorance of life. He told me that when our workmen organised a strike, he sold his gold watch—a present he got from father when he finished school—for 600 roubles and gave the money to Bogomoloff, who was collecting for the strikers. This hit me like a stone, although it was funny to think that the master was encouraging the strike of his workmen. It was childish . . . but . . .

"Koliam," I said, "you do believe in my love for you?"

"I don't want love," he returned. "I want freedom."

"Koliam, I know, of course, that you're in love with Larissa, and it all comes from that."

"That concerns no one but myself."

And then, merely because I wished to wrench out of his heart this premature love of his, I allowed myself this distortion of the truth:

"You're too late, my dear boy. Ever since the New Year Larissa has been my mistress."

This, of course, must have wounded him to the quick. He recoiled like a man who had had a tooth extracted, grew pale, looked at me in dismay, his lips quivered, he bent a silver spoon around his finger, and whispered:

"No, no, it isn't true! It can't be true!"

But I made up a few convincing details and Kolia believed me, got up and went to his room silently, looking sideways at me. Fear rose in me: was I doing right?

This was already at the end of the season. In the meantime, my relations with Larissa had become very friendly. I respectfully admired her unusual beauty, but allowed myself no familiarities with her. She had invested a large part of her fortune in her manager's enterprise, and I watched that she should be treated with due honesty. She welcomed my advice and appreciated my solidity and straightforwardness. I decided to ask her about Kolia and, arriving at her flat at midday when she was having her breakfast, I told her that my silly youth of a brother was in love with her and what did she think of this folly? She took it lightly at first:

"In what capacity are you here—as your brother's spokesman or as his rival?"

But immediately afterwards she frowned and, with an angry flash of her lovely eyes, said with annoyance that she'd had her fill of the love of youths and old men, soldiers and civil servants, policemen and revolutionaries.

"Don't you see," she said, "that I want to devote myself seriously to my work, and no love, nobody's love, can tempt me?"

She sat with her legs crossed under her on a sofa, in a raspberry-coloured velvet dressing-gown — she loved velvet! — antique silver clasps on the velvet, her hair, remarkably abundant and thick, floating down her back. She looked at me with a destroying glance and said:

"Don't disturb me. I'm going abroad very soon. In the summer I will be acting in Lipetsk and in the meantime your brother will have got over his measles. It doesn't go deep at his age."

Well, all this reassured me. I was myself already deeply in love with her, but did not know it at the time. Now I know that I loved her from the first shock of her glance. All of a sudden. All accidents are like that. All of a sudden . . .

He was silent and, in the pause that ensued, I asked:

"Was she really beautiful?"

"Can't you see it?" he said sternly, nodding towards the easel, and added didactically: "For others, she may not have been so beautiful, but we all love the most beautiful woman in the world. She left in the first week of Lent, leaving all her affairs in my hands. She went away, loaded with flowers, a bevy of admirers seeing her off . . . One of them, a lawyer, said to me with envy: 'You lucky devil.'"

My luck consisted in my having once, summoning up all my courage, and blinded with fear, kissed her hand. Quite unnecessarily, she kissed Kolia on the forehead when he came to see her off, and said to him:

"Be happy, dear boy."

And so Kolia and I remained alone. He sat night and day in his room upstairs, buried in books, grew thinner and sadder. Bogomoloff was always with him. One evening, as we were having tea, I asked him:

"Kolia, are you angry that fate has smiled upon me?"

"No," he said, "I'm not angry, but I'm unhappy because there is something I don't understand."

I think I said before there was an obstinate streak in him. During these months he had inconspicuously matured, become firmer. And more and more of a book-worm. I found it harder to talk to him. In a certain estrangement we lived through the winter and spring, and when, in June, Larissa came to Lipetsk, Kolia went to see her at once. I lived six days in a state of dull despair: at night my hair moved on my temples from sheer terror. I knew what it was that I feared. And it came. On the sixth day I got a letter from Larissa; the words stuck out of it like darts and a whiff of contempt came from the paper. She wrote:

"Your brother has told me that you have been boasting about my being your mistress. Answer at once if this is true. Answer as the honest man I take you to be."

As an honest man I was unable to answer. For her sake I had already given up my fiancée, a young girl who had loved me. For her sake I had lost my love for my brother and felt that my life was shattered, the bottom fallen out of it. I replied by wire one word: "NO."



The man raised his head as a witness taking his oath, and said firmly, with deep conviction:

"I assure you, I could not have replied otherwise. Do you understand? I just could not."

His blue eyeballs filled with tears. He looked at me like a blind man and, rubbing his throat with his fingers, clicked his teeth repeatedly like a dog. Then, after a fit of coughing, he went on hoarsely:

I believe I expected that Kolia would do something. . . . I thought that Larissa, too, might . . . well, be tempted by his youth. But two days later he came to my office straight from the station. Without taking off his coat, his hat tilted on the back of his head, straight as a soldier, but behaving like a drunkard, he came terribly close to me and said:

"Peter, you are a scoundrel."

Then I shouted at him:

"Listen to me! Don't you see that I, too, love her to distraction? Don't you see that I hadn't expected you back, that I thought you would kill yourself, and was not afraid of it, was not sorry for you? Although I still love you, that you know well. . . . But if her spell is insurmountable, what can I do?"

He took off his cap, sat down, and stared at me, his face dark. It was clear that he was frightened. His eyes blinked in despair. I went on:

"You are handsome, more intelligent than I. It is easy to love you; you can talk about women convincingly—there is no woman whose heart you can't reach. Your love is the play of imagination—mine is flesh and blood. . . ."

He rose and locked the door of the office, then came up to me, looking very grim. I thought for a moment he was going to hit me, but he only took me by the shoulder and shook me.

"So that's how it is? I see. But how shall we go on living now?"

I pressed my face to his hand.

"I don't know," I said.

But there was joy in my heart again. I felt he was stronger and better than I. I had always known it, but it became per-

fectly clear at that moment. A new hope was born in me that things would be all right between us once again.

"I don't know," I repeated. "You are wiser than I."

"Why did you blacken us both in her eyes?" he asked.

Well, that was something I could not explain—I myself was unable to understand by then why I had done it. He began walking up and down the room saying he ought to try and get moved to another university, go away for a time, but I begged him:

"No, no, don't do that! With you here, I'll try and pull myself together, but if you go I'll get into trouble. She does not understand anything about business and I'm unable to refuse her anything."

He gave a wry smile and said:

"But what shall I do now that you've cast aspersions on me?"

I begged his forgiveness and we decided to tell Larissa that I had been joking, that he had misunderstood me and his youthful ardour had flared up in him, rousing his indignation.

"Very well, then," Kolia agreed, and turned to me with a brotherly rebuke: "You cunning oriental, you! I wouldn't have believed it of you! Though not *very* cunning, not really. . . ."

And, raising his hand again as for an oath, the man said ponderously:

"A wonderful youth, my brother was. Of great integrity, great nobility of heart. That I know well . . ."

The rain was weaving its web behind the window. A black, soppy figure stopped by the lamp-post, raised a fat leg, and pulling off a golosh, started hitting it against the post. A fiery spider flickered in the glass web. Drinking some more wine, which failed to have any effect on him, the man continued in his brittle voice, drawing up his shoulders and crossing his arms over his chest:

After this, Kolia and I lived as though we'd only just become acquainted. At night, we often discussed various problems of life, and Kolia went on astonishing me by the abun-

dance and cheerlessness of his remarkable ideas. His eyes had become brighter from the dark circles underneath them and the thinness of his face which had acquired a kind of earnest transparence. Most often, he talked about life being built in the shape of a pyramid and, though its foundation was large, it was rotten and unstable, it might give way suddenly under the burden and crumble down. He pulled at his short moustache as he spoke, and smiled wryly. Neither life nor thought could have any other shape, he said. Thought was also shaped like a pyramid, the base composed of all the overwhelming factors of a merciless struggle and the top just a sharp, puerile solution. I liked these ideas and accepted them as true, but I disliked it when Kolia agreed without argument with the Bogomoloff chap. One day, Morton dined with us—the biologist who ran the factory, a Frenchman of exceptional intelligence. Bogomoloff preached his nonsense about freedom and Morton made fun of him, asserting that the essence of life was reason. Bogomoloff rudely interrupted him:

“Why, ants and beavers possess the same reasoning power as yourself; that is not free thought, it is merely an ape-like power of adaptation.”

That priest's son always came out with such rude remarks. His coarseness, his large bearded face, the dirty, unkempt hair exasperated me. Only his voice was clever, but Kolia thought the world of him. I never spoke of Larissa with Kolia. Only once, discussing her with Pavloff, he said:

“Her talent lies in her beauty, but she has no real talent for the stage. I think that she has made a mistake, has taken the wrong path. She is bored, chilled to the bone by life, and is searching for a fire to warm herself at. A professor I know has a small paralysed daughter who plays at warming herself in front of a picture representing a bonfire. Larissa, too, is warming herself in front of an imaginary fire.”

Pavloff shouted, stormed, gesticulated, but Kolia's wise words made me happy. I believed him. Myself, I was unable to judge of Larissa's dramatic ability; her acting was no concern of mine. When she appeared on the stage, I had eyes only for *her*. I listened to her lazy little voice and watched her beautiful body move about as if floating in the air. She walked lightly and at the same time regally, as though granting

a favour to the earth and to the people around her. The noble lines of her legs . . . and the small breasts, placed far apart . . .

Closing his eyes, the man shook his head.

What was I speaking about? Ah, yes. I was happy to hear from Kolia that she had taken the wrong path, for I thought that perhaps that erroneous path would bring her home to me. When she arrived I went to see her with great determination, but found her very much upset—the summer season had been a failure and she had lost about 30,000 roubles. I promptly discovered a way of reassuring her, saying that I had used her money for a profitable operation with fats and was able to offer her 27,000-odd roubles. I made it not a round figure on purpose to make it appear more plausible. She was delighted—sometimes even money gladdens a person's heart.

"You really mean it?" she said. "Oh, you really are a perfect friend. And what is your mad young brother up to?"

I succeeded in making her believe that Kolia had been mistaken, that he had misunderstood my joke. Frowning, she asked, taking me by the ear and eyeing me suspiciously:

"Joke? What sort of a joke?"

"I said to him one day that if you were willing . . ."

"Well?" she asked, digging her nails into the flesh of my ear, angrily urging me to speak.

"To marry me," I said.

"You're lying," she said, pushing me away. "It was not like that. You must have said something else. I warn you, my dear sir, that it is dangerous to joke with me. Did I pinch you very hard?"

"No," I said, "I hardly felt anything."

"That's a pity. I tried to pinch as hard as I could."

After a moment's silence, she added in a low voice:

"You're very nice people, both of you. But so old-fashioned, as though born too late. Strange people. Let's be friends, shall we? But no more joking, or . . ."

And she lifted a warning finger.

She had a wonderful taste in dress . . . the man went on with a sigh, watching intently the oblique threads of the rain behind the window, the wind had tangled them up, torn them

apart and now they poured down in glass beads on the pane and on the lantern.

Whether in a tight dress with a high collar, or in evening dress with a wide skirt, she appeared to be naked. Can you see it? Quite naked. It was that proud body of hers. I was afraid to look at her . . . And annoyed, too, at the thought that others might be seeing her as I did.

At home, Kolia asked me what was the matter with my ear. I said that I had caught it between the scissors as I was trimming my beard.

The season had started. This is an old-fashioned town, you know, full of staid merchants—the audience is not fond of too much intellectual effort; it likes light costume comedy, but when people in ordinary clothes walk about the stage wondering who loves whom and talking about it in dreary, commonplace words—where is the entertainment, where is the medicine against boredom? And Larissa particularly liked to act in such plays as Hauptmann or Ibsen. So when her colleague, Sosnina, an ill-tempered shrew, acted in “Mary Queen of Scots” or “Love’s Labour’s Lost,” people swarmed to the theatre, but Larissa was not popular, and though Pavloff wrote about her with great enthusiasm, only the young people of the town, and women because of her clothes, came to see her, but the stalls and boxes were empty. She never had a full house and this distressed her very much.

“In our world, where you can’t live without love and where people don’t know how to love, the theatre could teach them what love is—love for humanity, love of woman, love of life,” she used to say.

She lived on a grand scale. When she was not acting, there would be the inevitable parties at her home, supper and wine and sleigh-driving. Everybody went insane around her. Pavloff, his face of a greenish hue, coughing and battling for breath, would shout: “Let us be like the sun!”\* Bohmer, the vaudeville actress, would sing cynical little ditties. Bragin, of course, poured out his nonsense about the Jews. Mametkuloff neighed like a horse and then the whole lot of them would scream: “God! Death! Love!”

\* A poem by K. Balmont, a symbolist poet of the times.

A shudder would run down one's back from this hubbub. Larissa would sit like a queen and wear an odd, sinister smile. I often remembered Kolia's words—here, indeed, was someone who had lit a bonfire, sat watching people burn to ashes on it but remained lonely and cold.

On such evenings, my love for Larissa rose to heroic heights and all I wanted was to boil all these people into soap. Kolia and I would watch each other like two thieves determined to steal the same treasure, but not to share it. I believe that Larissa saw through us. One day, having had too much to drink in her despair, she asked in a challenging manner:

"Well, dear brothers, you're not afraid that I shall eat you up?"

Just like that. I remained silent, but Kolia answered with a clever joke:

"It is better to be eaten up by a lioness than scratched by a kitchen cat."

Sometimes Kolia and I, in the depth of depression, would ask each other:

"Well, my boy?"—and laugh. We were even able to laugh.

Kolia said one day:

"She is like a sunray you try to catch with a mirror."

But very soon we stopped laughing.

An Englishman came to town. William Proctor was his name and his interests were in hemp. He spoke very little Russian and Mametkuloff introduced him to Larissa, who spoke both English and French. So that Proctor fellow took his seat by her side like a monumental stone and never budged from it, rolling his great big grey eyes. Tall, well-built, he had a beautifully tanned skin, a scar on his forehead and something indomitable about him. He smoked like a chimney, drank vodka like a calf does milk, but was never any the worse for it, just half-closed his eyes at times, looking as though people astonished him, but he did not believe them and did not want to show his astonishment. Only once when Sonia Svantzeva, a very gifted actress, sang him a children's lullaby, he cracked his tongue with a noise like a pistol shot and said to her:

"Thank you. This is better than anything I've heard before."

He kissed her hand and went away in an odd manner, without saying good-bye. From then on Larissa became more subdued; she acquired a strange languor in her movements . . . well, you could see what the meaning of it all was.

Kolia, in the meantime, became thinner, gloomier.

"There goes a real hunter for our game; he won't miss his shot."

He stopped studying, remained in bed till midday, walked about all day in his slippers, whistling irritatingly. As to myself, having heard that the Englishman was a gambler, I introduced him to a lawyer in the club who, it was said, did a bit of cheating. I was hoping that he'd clear out the Englishman's pockets. He did. But I had, partly, to pay for the losses. Larissa called me and said:

"Lend me 50,000 roubles."

"Certainly."

I knew her financial position better than she did herself, and guessed what she wanted the money for. I could not refuse it to her. Had she told me that Proctor was staying the night with her and ordered me to prepare the bed, I would have done so. Perhaps killed myself afterwards, but still obeyed her orders. Probably not killed myself either. For I'm still alive, am I not? And there were worse things than Proctor. He went away very soon and Larissa remained behind in a kind of angry sorrow and began to lead a still more hectic life. Kolia, too, began to drink.

My God, how painful it is to remember all this! I suggested that he should go abroad, to Petersburg, to Siberia. All he said was:

"Let's go together."

"My dear boy, surely you can see that I haven't a chance?"

He replied sullenly:

"The weather is of feminine gender.\* That is why it is capricious. And you are cunning, patient . . . You might wait for the turn in the weather—perhaps even bring it about."

He spoke with malice and sarcasm and his glance when he looked at me was hostile. He would sit, dangling his foot and whistling, and the room became too close for the two of us.

\* In Russian.

Larissa spent the whole of Lent in town. The performances started at Easter and, two weeks later, Kolia shot himself in Theatre Square, just here, round the corner. Something happened between them. I don't know what it was, but something did. He'd been to see her the day before; they went together to visit Pavloff's grave in the churchyard. Yes. Kolia shot himself through the heart. They brought him home. I howled like a wounded beast and everything around me dropped into darkness; it was as though I were swept by the storm into a well, into an abyss, and being whirled and tossed about in it. I remember that Kolia's lips were parted in a mocking snarl and below the nipple of his left breast was a stain, like a small spider. No blood at all, just a little dark spider. Then such hatred towards Larissa overcame me that if she had been there at the time I don't know what I'd have done to her, but she would have payed for it. She arrived with Bragin at nightfall. It was dark outside, as it is now, and the rain was rustling just like this. I met her in the hall, screamed and stamped at her, but she just pushed me aside in silence with a commanding gesture, and asked brusquely:

"Where?"

Her cloak—a theatre wrap—was drenched with the rain; it dropped from her shoulder and dragged along the floor. Her face was almost blue in its pallor, the eyes burning dazzlingly in it; her whole appearance reminded one of a figure out of some frightening fairy-tale. She sank on to her knees in front of the couch where Kolia was lying, stroked his face with one hand and made the sign of the cross with the other, and said aloud:

"No, my little boy, forgive me, forgive me . . . Didn't I tell you? . . . My God! Forgive me . . ."

I was also on my knees beside her, whispering:

"It is your work. It is your fault . . ."

But there was no anger in me any more, just a dreadful fear and such a sense of emptiness and clarity—there was nothing that escaped me; I noted every change in her face, every movement of her fingers.

"Be quiet!" she cried. "Be quiet!"

And then she stroked my face as well with her palm, as though I, too, were a corpse. Her hand was terribly hot and



trembled, and I was shaking from head to foot. Then she rose and walked to the window.

"Give me a strong drink," she said.

I took her to my rooms. That confounded skeleton Bragin came with us, wiping his spectacles as though nothing had happened. I ordered some wine, some tea, and, from that evening, my dear sir, we started on a life which surpasses the most vivid imagination. She drank a glass of port, then some brandy and tea, and seemed all aglow, her eyes burning still more wildly—her eyes, as you can see from the portraits, were always mocking and alien to the world at large.

She began to speak, with a devastating abruptness. I never thought that such a lovely and intelligent woman could speak with such bitterness and despair.

"So this dear, sweet, clever boy has killed himself because I did not do as he wished. But what am I to do? Must I really meekly surrender to anyone who desires me? To Bragin, who for three years has been waiting for his hour to come, to you—for you, too, of course, hope to see me in your bed? Is it possible, is it really possible that merely because God has given me beauty, I have to hand it out to any man who asks for it, even if he is repulsive to me?"

I swayed on my feet from shame and fear, hearing her words. Fear, because I realised that there was truth in them; they revealed another, a very complicated side of her life. And Bragin, very tipsy, with a grimace on his bony mug, said:

"Larissa, darling, I don't like dramas, I don't believe in them. It's all quite simple. The rich student has committed suicide. God rest his soul—and for you, it's good publicity."

I seized him by the collar, wanting to hit him, but Larissa stopped me as though I were a helpless child.

"Leave him alone. He's a scoundrel. Very gifted, but a scoundrel. Perhaps just because he is gifted. Good men are rarely that."

Bragin, the skunk, agreed with her.

"That's true. I pretend to be good only on the stage, and I find it very funny myself; that's why the audience laughs. The audience likes to see the good being pathetic and ridiculous."

And Larissa went on with her outrageous words:

"I have an aim: I want to banish all vulgarity from the stage, sweep away all the old refuse, show the soul of the modern woman who has outgrown herself and is wondering now what to do with herself. Love is not enough, nor is maternity—she wants something else. What it is, I don't know, but she must have it."

How many thousands of times I had to hear those words later.

"It is all so hard," she went on. "I find it so hard. I am still a stranger on the stage. People stand in my way, obstructing my life, my work, making demands on me, and then end like this, as corpses. Your Kolia was clever and nice, but don't you see that I need no one . . . no one?"

She went on and on, and kept drinking all the time as though putting out a fire. Bragin and I did the same. I was so drunk that I wept, I felt so sorry for Larissa, for myself, for Kolia. For her especially. I went on my knees in front of her and told her that I would serve her all my life like a dog. She stroked my hair and said:

"Yes, Peter, I know you have the honest, faithful soul of a dog."

Oh, gracious God . . .

Something rustled in the corner by the stove. The man sighed and, removing one of the candles, lit up the corner.

"There is a rat there. It always begins to scratch at this hour."

He stared fixedly at the window, where the rain went on throwing its oblique lines across the flame of the street lamp. Black hemispheres floated across the dim bubble of light—people returning with umbrellas from the theatre. Somebody shouted right under the window:

"No, I can't do that."

On that night I started loving Larissa with a truly unrequited love. In the summer, she took a villa on the Oka, near Riazan. I often went to stay with her and saw that she went on living noisily, boisterously, surrounded by men who coveted her. I asked her:

"They're in your way?"

"Yes," she said, "they're all in my way. The only one who helps me to live is you, Peter."

Such words were a bane to me, of course, and she was generous with them and thus attached me more and more to herself. She was altogether generous. That was curious—she was not kind, but never amiss for a kind word, threw away money like paper and I had to watch very carefully to see that the clever beggars, who made a commerce of their complaints and miseries, did not fleece her. She gave money to people with such a smile that if I were a beggar I wouldn't have taken a kopeck from her. She had such contempt for people, especially the successful ones. She would listen to somebody's complaints and then suddenly smile with her eyes, half close them and say:

"Oh dear, oh dear, how miserable we are . . ."

Such words overwhelmed me like snowdrifts and, fearing her contempt, I kept silent about my own misery and found all the joy of my life in the care of her and anxiety about her. She welcomed me as the closest of friends and when introducing me to others always said:

"Pray be kind to my one disinterested friend."

People thought, of course, that she was my mistress. Yes. Pray be kind. Well, the comic actress, Sonia Svantzeva, who lived with Larissa, a pretty and gifted lady of inexhaustible gaiety, did, indeed, show her kindness and fell in love with me. I was sitting with her in the garden by the river, admiring the sunset. It was a hot, fragrant evening; the lime-tree was in flower. Smoking a cigarette, Sonia asked:

"Well, Peter, my poor knight, you find life hard, don't you?"

"No," I said, "it's not so bad."

I was afraid to tell her the truth for fear of putting Larissa in a bad light.

"Now don't be a liar, my dear. Haven't I been watching you for three years? And let me tell you, in the words of the ditty—

'In vain, my boy, your efforts,  
In vain your poor sore feet,  
You'll get nothing for these efforts,  
Nothing but defeat.'"

"Here am I," she said, "who love you, and it is indecent for a woman to be the first to admit it. I love you. I love you very much, because I see that you know what love means and I feel sorry for you in a kind, womanly, motherly way."

I cannot tell you how intimidated I was by this—fit to plunge into the river. The river was there, you know, flowing away, as muddy as my life.

There were tears in Sonia's eyes, but she laughed as she went on:

"It hurts, the way I love you. Like a girl. Yes, just like a girl."

In a stupid way, I said:

"Thank you . . . but I . . ."

"Sh . . . sssh . . ." she said in a low voice, and stretched out her hand as though pushing me away. "Go away. But remember, in case you ever need it, that there is a human being on this earth who loves you with all her soul, with no pretence. Larissa's soul has been eaten up by the little thing that's called a brain. . . ."

All this would have been very nice, sad though it was, had she not said these last words about Larissa's soul. They hurt me. I may not have understood her soul, but I loved it and took it as it was. And here was a woman who, out of rivalry and jealousy, was destroying this soul so dear to me. I coldly took my leave and Svantzeva remained smoking on the bench as I disappeared into the wood. And then such a fierce misery overcame me, that—would you believe it?—for the first time in my life I burst into tears. I shook with sobs, realising that I had probably thrust away the only happiness left to me. I also felt that it was unfair to Larissa. I was in such a state that, having sat down on an ant-hill, I never noticed it. I was stung very badly. The ants went on stinging me but I still sat there without realising what was going on. After that I had to go and bathe and shake out all my clothes. I remained by the river all night, a black despair smouldering within me, destroying all resistance. In the morning Larissa summoned me after breakfast and said:

"Sophie has staged a dramatic scene before me on your account and has done it very badly—it is not her role. It is rather silly of you to have rejected her offer—but that is *your*

business. But if you complained to her about me, it is more than silly—and in this case my business. Did you complain?"

"Nothing of the kind," I said.

She looked at me with that smile that pierced the heart.

"I believe you're telling the truth," she said. "Look here, my dear boy, don't expect anything from me. There'll never be anything like that between us—so make a note of it. On the other hand, I'm glad you rejected Sophie's offer. Glad for my own sake and for yours. She would have got bored with you very soon—and I don't like not having you about. D'you realise what a brute I am?"

She wore a white lace dress on that day and her body shone through it . . . painfully dazzling. Everything she had on was white, stockings and shoes. The chestnut-coloured hair crowned her head and her eyes smiled, half-mocking, half angry. She was lying on the couch, one slipper had dropped from her foot and the heel was round as an apple. There was a lot of sun in the room, masses of flowers. She looked so indescribably lovely amidst the sunshine and the flowers. What power there is in a woman's beauty, my dear sir . . . I remembered Kolia's words: "A sunbeam that you catch with a mirror."

After a silence, she said thoughtfully:

"You don't know how talented Sophie is, Peter. She has no scope for her talent, there are no plays good enough for her. If only I had half of her gifts! And she wants to be the wife of a soap-merchant! Look here, why don't you get rid of all that soap? What do you need it for?"

"Very well," I said, "I will."

It was true that I had no further need of the factory. I knew already that I would remain alone all my life. Returning home, I told Morton, the manager, to find a buyer, but he, amazed at first and then very angry, said that he would not sell it to anyone but buy it himself. So that was settled. I sold it at an advantageous price for him—he had well deserved it. And I went to Riazan, where Larissa was acting, and took up my quarters in an hotel. Thus began my new life. For twelve years I carried on with this fitful tramp's existence—for twelve years! It was hard to get used to it, to this Bohemian life, this idleness, the dirty hotel rooms and boarding-houses,

to an endless succession of strange new people. I was like a grain that fate was grinding in its mill together with sand. Many are the people in Russia who seem to live for no reason at all. I believe I have said already that they are particularly numerous around the theatre, around deceit. For the theatre is deceit throughout.

Larissa acted truthfully, nakedly, without guile, but even when she uttered outrageously theatrical words, the audience did not believe her, while other actresses provoked sincere enthusiasm and tears of compassion with the glamorous casuistry of their words. Even I have to admit Larissa acted in an uninteresting manner, although I, personally, don't like and don't appreciate any art except music. It was difficult to understand whether the character Larissa represented was good or bad. And the audience likes clarity; it does not wish to think, preferring to speak. This is as it should be. Each man wants to simplify life. To each of us a hen is much nearer than a swallow. Larissa's simplicity was enigmatic and therefore, although they all admired her beauty, she was not popular. She was aware of this, of course, and it distressed her. I could see that she began to be more and more scornful of people. Sometimes, after having had a drink, hammering her little fist on the table, her eyes flashing, she would try and persuade herself:

"It's a lie, you brutes. I'll make you understand me, force you to it. The theatre isn't a toy."

I felt unutterably sorry for her, and in my thoughts tried to appease her anger.

"Why don't you leave it alone? Why scatter the pearls of your soul before swine?"

And I prayed that God should lead her away from that path. But she went on, obstinately:

"I'll *make* them love me."

In the smutty, vulgar sense of the word, she was "loved" every season, of course, in every town. It was both amusing and embittering for me to watch the unwholesome excitement of schoolboys, students, adult and experienced pursuers of love; revolting to see old short-winded dogs, with heavy lips covering their dentures, circling around her and howling, their mouths watering with lust. And the parties! She arranged

more and more parties, drank more and more heavily, but wine had little effect on her. She had a strong head. She would just get a bit flushed, her pupils would dilate a little in her half-closed, mocking eyes—their glance cut like a knife. Her tongue could be merciless as well and sometimes she said things that hurt like a slap on the face. A lawyer in Kherson paid her insistent and brazen attentions. He was so slick and cloying, with the head of a fox and the cold hands of a corpse. He loved to speak French and read over and over again the same poem:

“ I am a knife and a wound as well,  
The slapped face and the dealing hand,  
A meek victim and a tyrant  
With a wicked heart.”

One evening at supper, he kissed her hand and Larissa, wiping it squeamishly with a pocket handkerchief, asked in a loud and devastating voice:

“ Have you got a cold?”

He grew very green in the face and his eyes blinked as from a sharp blow.

She said worse things than that; coarse and even obscene words did not frighten her, acquiring a special spice on her lips. She treated her admirers with defiance, very capriciously, and loved to incite the one against the other. In Minsk, the assistant governor and a rich merchant were both chasing her and she hounded them on so skilfully that it produced a regular scandal in the town and the papers were full of it. She, for her part, fell in love there with the violinist in the orchestra, a Jewish boy, made me give him a scholarship, and sent him to Vienna to study. Ah, yes, I had forgotten—the comic actor, Bragin, hung himself on a chandelier after sending odious letters to Larissa and me. He lived as a scoundrel and didn't even have the courage to die decently. Wanted to play Christ, indeed! That's another thing that I've always observed: the weaker the man, the more he is determined to play the noble part. Some even succeed in doing so. . . . A little more wine?

He got up and bent down by the stove. "It's good wine," he said, "her favourite wine, St. Estèphe. I used to get it straight from France at the time."

He carefully opened two bottles, put one in front of me, poured himself some wine out of the other, and, shutting his eyes, drank it down, moving his Adam's apple as he did so. Then he wiped his mouth and continued smoothly, softly, in low tones, as though reciting a litany.

She fell in love rather often, but in a queer, abrupt way, as though acquitting herself of a duty. In Tambov, a prison inspector came to grips with an officer on her account. They fought a duel, the inspector was wounded. She refused to see either of the two men and, breaking off her performance in the middle of the season, departed with a country squire to his estate. The squire's hobby was archæological excavations. He was an odd fellow, uncouth and helpless and wreathed in smiles. She was always interested in odd people. She lived for twenty-six days on the estate. I always kept an accurate account of her love affairs. I don't know why. Perhaps I thought that one day I would have to remind her of it all. After all, I was only human and in those days consoled myself with the thought that I would have my revenge.

Sometimes I would watch Larissa glance at a man with a special embracing glance and I would know—she's off. I was never mistaken. So I would stop going to see her. In the night, grinding my teeth, I would think, shall I poison her? In all the numerous towns we visited, people would laugh at me. Then, as soon as she was free, there I was again, hovering around her in all humility. A bit sullen, of course, and then she would shake her little finger at me:

"Peter, darling, don't be a fool."

One day, unable to control myself, I asked her:

"Doesn't it make you feel ashamed to turn a man into a dog?"

She looked at me intently and answered with a sigh:

"Sure you are a man?"

I was very much surprised by this sigh—it somehow reassured me and I became more patient. Once she fell in love with a writer—a playwright, rather—an arrogant and brutal



man. He must have pinched her one night at supper under the table, for she jumped up and said:

"Peter, this gentleman ought to go home to his wife—please see him out."

Well, I saw him out, not very politely, you know. He was a blusterer. I met several writers and in all of them, as in actors, there was something effeminate, artificial, pretentious. They were like tightrope artists, all of them, walking carefully as they balanced, eager to please everyone, to attract.

So by Larissa's side I lived this Bohemian life, in an atmosphere of scandal, pettiness, subterfuge—for five years and, in the sixth year, in Tomsk, another life started for me, whether better or worse, I could not say. The people of Siberia are coarse and brutal, but Larissa played "Nora" very well there, and the young people liked her. They closed in on her, these Siberians, sat around like bears, munching and chewing her with their eyes. They showered furs upon her, took her out driving and altogether raised such a smoke-screen around her that even I, a restrained man, was blinded and seemed to lose my ground. Larissa was in excellent form, radiant, more beautiful than ever. Suddenly I learned that two of the rich merchants had made a wager: which of them would be the lucky one with her before the New Year? I invited them to dine in a private room in a restaurant. I had my revolver with me. It was Siberia, after all, and I used to return home late. . . . Well, I said to these sportsmen:

"Leave that bet of yours alone and don't you dare touch the lady. I have no reason to hang on to life and if I notice that this warning has not had its effect, I'll smash both your heads to pulp."

They made at first as if to attack me, but I frightened them by showing my revolver and they realised then that I was not joking.

"Very well," they said.

Then they tried to fill me with drink, but it did not come off. It was they who got drunk. One of them was bearded and gaunt—he looked like a saint on an ikon, but with the eyes of a brigand. The other was fat, with a red complexion, a foul mouth. When he was in his cups, the bearded one pushed his ruby ring into my hand, urging me to accept it

as a gift. All this would have ended quite smoothly if, to her misfortune, Larissa had not learned about the bet. I've seen her angry, but never like that! She was standing with her back to me, looking at the snowstorm through the window, and slowly, heavily, turned to me a totally strange face blinded with fury. She ordered me:

"Get those brutes here to supper."

The supper took place—there were the four of us, Larissa beautifully dressed, very charming and witty. Suddenly, in the middle of it, she turned to them and said:

"I've asked you here tonight to tell you that you are scoundrels, both of you."

They laughed, thinking the joke was going on, but Larissa started telling them off until they were red in the face and ready to beat her up. Well, then, I had to throw them out. She stood in the middle of the room, rubbing her face with her hands and looking at me as though I were a stranger.

"You, too, go away," she said.

I was afraid to leave her alone, but dared not disobey, and went.

A week or so later, she was acting again and someone hissed from the pit. Hissing started from above, then hushing began below, followed by swearing, the women shrieking. She played the act to the end. I rushed to her dressing-room afterwards and found her, very calm, powdering her face in front of the mirror.

"It's they who organised it, of course?"

"I suppose so, I don't know," I said.

The crowd rushed in then to see her, apologising, sympathising, kissing her hands. She smiled graciously at everybody, but her eyes looked wild and dismayed. The same thing happened the next day—hissing and noises during the performance, some fighting in the interval, and the next day the Police Chief came to see her. He was an ill-mannered drunkard. I don't know what he said to her, but the same night she declared that she was going to Perm, where her impresario had another theatre. As we sat in the compartment in the train, she said to me:

"Well, Peter darling, are you sorry for me? Things are bad indeed if you have to be sorry for me." And, with a note of

fear in her voice, she went on in a whisper: "Have I really no talent? Am I such a failure, unable to conquer an audience? Tell me the truth . . ."

I knew the truth but I did not have the courage to tell her. . . . I don't know what she would have done to me for that truth . . . I tried to console her as best I could, but she went on asking:

"What is the cause of my unhappiness?"

The wheels rattled, everything moved and swayed behind the window. She peered through it and said:

"Sinking, I am sinking . . ."

Never had she spoken so miserably before. She had, of course, her reasons for complaining. She had been acting for more than ten years and her name was still unknown. She hadn't been asked to act in the main towns. We roamed about in backwaters and she had by then squandered all her money. Only her beauty and freshness remained as though grafted on to her for ever. . . .

My story-teller stopped as though short of breath, unclasped his hands, threw them apart in an odd way and clung with his fingers to the arm of the chair, peering into the dim, wet stain of light behind the pane, the opal bubble pierced by the steel threads of the rain. With his eyes wide open, he listened for a few minutes to the soft splash and rustle, to the persistent ripple of water flowing down the drain. His grey, dry face became still sharper when he started to speak again:

We arrived in Perm. Over the town, in the darkness, a snowstorm was howling, whistling, moaning in a kind of hellish saraband and we moved as though not on the earth at all but torn away from it, carried along on white clouds into the unknown. This dreariness droned on for three days and then one evening Larissa asked me to come and have tea with her. I arrived. She was sitting in a tired, forlorn attitude, in a wine-coloured gown embroidered with gold, her hair down her back—there was something girlish about her, you know. And she was almost forty at the time. She sat there, silent and gentle. She had lost weight in those last days.

"My dear friend," she said, "my poor friend, what should

I have done without you, my nannie? And just because you love me with such self-denial, I have to ruin your life, isn't that so? I *have* ruined it, haven't I?"

I lost all self-control. Never had she spoken to me like that. . . . I fell on my knees, kissed her feet and murmured:

"Ruined it, yes . . ."

She stroked my hair and whispered:

"Irreparably?"

Her hot tears fell on my neck. And then, you know, for the first time I made her mine, to increase my misery. When I came to my senses, I saw her sitting, half-dressed, on the bed, fastening her blouse, her face very calm. I heard her dreamy voice:

"Well, so now we're man and wife. Happy? Now let's have tea. And we'll order some champagne."

It seemed to me that a deathly cold wave enveloped and scalded me. I threw myself on the floor at her feet and howled and moaned:

"You do not love me—as a lover I mean nothing to you. . . ."

She leapt to her feet and darted about the room, beating her fist against her breast and whispered, her breath coming quickly:

"Dear one, darling, what can I do if I can't—if there is nothing left in me? Try and understand—nothing."

Dear God, I had understood that well enough. It was that which overwhelmed me. I remained sitting on the floor, rocking to and fro with pain, while she rushed about the room, her half-naked body, that had remained cold to me, flashing past.

She shouted:

"I've scattered my heart for the delight of idiots."

I begged her to leave the stage, come abroad with me. I had enough money. I implored her to take pity on herself.

"No," she said, "I can't, I can't. I can't believe that I have no talent. But you, you must go. Enough torment for you, enough suffering. Go away, before it is too late. One does not love out of pity—it is an insult to do so out of pity. You are a dear, a wonderful friend, but you will be destroyed by me, crippled. . . ."

She went on like that for a long time, with great nobility of feeling and warmth, but, of course, it was absurd, impossible. I made her sit down on the couch, sat at her feet and said:

"There is no life for me away from you. I can't go away. Live as you like and I will always be at your side."

She made as if to kiss me again, but I begged her:

"No, not against your will."

How she wept, my God . . ."

He, too, began to cry. Scanty tears flowed sparingly along his yellow cheeks and beard. He shook his head without wiping the wet cheeks, and continued with an effort:

After this, I followed her unremittingly for another seven years. It was as though the devil himself was standing unseen in front of us, holding our hands, but not letting her come to me, mocking at me. It is impossible, it is humiliating to tell all that I suffered. And so did she, no less than I. In the theatre, things went from bad to worse. Larissa had never been on friendly terms with her stage colleagues, and they constantly intrigued against her. Now all this increased and began to boil up, probably because she was more gentle as she dropped her haughtiness and her contempt for them. There is a strange law in life: the further away people are from you, the better they are—the nearer, the worse. Bragin used to say: "Don't allow a woman to sit on your knee, she'll be around your neck in no time." This can be said of all people. The actors, poor fellows, would fall in love with Larissa; the actresses hated her and were jealous of her. There is, as we know, nothing easier than to lie and slander. Previously, Larissa knew how to keep people at a distance; she lived without envy, without boasting either of her brain or of her education. Now I began to notice that as she lost her self-assurance, she started to boast a bit here and there—she would speak, for instance, of her great success in such and such a town, where I knew there had not been any success. The actors knew that too, of course, and though they're boasters, all of them, they laughed at her. She would show them my presents and say they were from an admiring audi-

ence. She made up the story that Stanislavsky himself had been urging her to come to his theatre in Moscow—but that had never been the case. No. She also began to make a display of her brain, and show off her education. And here a doctor appeared on the scene and exercised some influence on her, a stranger who had evidently also chosen the wrong path. A small man, neatly shaped, strikingly clean, and not very Russian in appearance. He wore a strange little suit of an odd cut, and in spite of his grey temples looked like a youth. Kolia, at that age, would have probably looked like that. His hair was cropped, his dark, gentle eyes smiled guiltily through his spectacles. One day, when Larissa was not well, he came and anchored himself by her side and sat there day after day.

I was unable to understand whether he was kind or not. Was it because he was so imbued with sorrow that his words were so bitter? He said unpleasant things all the time, but somehow as though against his own will, and they did not have any effect. Larissa would tell him about her illness and he would reply:

“It is the approach of that sad horror that we confusedly call the beauty of old age.”

Or:

“We are heroes, all of us, because we learn to forget that we are doomed to death. And our lives are a dreary tragedy filled with charming light-heartedness.”

He said insulting things to Larissa about love:

“Love for a woman is comparable to the dismal act of God who also tried unsuccessfully to create a beautiful world out of nothing, out of emptiness.”

One might have thought that Larissa would have taken offence at that—surely she wasn't emptiness, she wasn't *nothing*? But, to my great astonishment, she did not resent it at all. They used to talk the night through, and very soon I realised that she was having an affair with him. It hurt me, of course. I had not lost hope, you see, that I would one day win her love with my obstinacy, but I didn't take a dislike to the doctor—quite the contrary, we became very friendly.

There was no guile about him. One day, he said to me:

“I know that I drink your wine and kiss your woman.”

"No," I replied, "the woman does not belong to me, she belongs to her misery."

He looked at me fixedly, and answered in verse—he liked talking in verse:

"Do you know:

'Fate treats us with more cruelty,  
Knowing that we surrender . . .'

"I see that Larissa is happy with you. I thank God for that."

"What a curious man you are," he said.

"So are you," I replied.

We glanced at each other and smiled. And drank a toast to each other. He drank heavily. Larissa was really happy with him. She spent more time at home, became less restless, went to fewer parties. Her conversations with the doctor were significant and in dead earnest, although they dealt with the usual thoughts: God, death, love. But they dealt with them so profoundly that sometimes it used to frighten me—as though it was not human beings any more who were speaking, but . . . I do not even know what to compare them with. As though there were just two voices torn away from all live matter, competing in the emptiness of a silent night. There was no unison in them, but they talked peaceably, each listening carefully to what the other said. The doctor maintained that a human life can be likened to the trajectory of a bullet directed at an unknown target, and that there was no higher purpose in human life at all. These embittered words reminded me of Kolia. Larissa, on the other hand, tried to prove with great persistence that a sublime purpose was concealed in life, but that only a woman could be aware of it, a woman, the stimulant of all desire and passion, sinful as well as pure. Loving as I did the ungovernable pride of her soul, these thoughts seemed to be the essence of truth. I remember her saying:

"There is something within the reach of a woman which is beyond the reach of a man; a woman is conscious of the birth of a new life within her flesh, she is the constant source of renewal of the world's potential power. She is conscious of being the sparkle that sets fire to the best thoughts, the incentive for heroic deeds, all poetry and beauty come from

her, and if there were no women in the world you would all be living like beasts, thinking only about food. There is nothing more solid and understandable than a woman, and there is nothing except her for you to lean upon."

One day she said:

"Mothers die more peacefully than fathers because mothers are aware of the uninterruptedness of life."

The doctor said with a laugh:

"Animals die even more peacefully than women."

This started a quarrel. At times, something exploded in Larissa's soul like a storm, and then the doctor and I were swept away like grains of dust. It always happened suddenly, without any reason, because of words. One day, I remember, the three of us were sitting together. Larissa was silent, and I had been talking about my trip to Moscow, when the doctor said quietly:

"Criminals and women can hear when you think of them."

How angry she was! These words seemed to have scalded her. And this was immediately followed by an orgy that lasted three days; then bed, with a tired heart.

The doctor had T.B. and soon went to Switzerland. Then came a period of real madness. Larissa seemed to be running downhill chasing her youth. I've noticed that happen with many a woman: as the fortieth year knocks at her heart, the woman's hour strikes and the poor creature is tossed and whirled about, forgetting all shame, as though wishing to devour in one year all that she hadn't had the time to do before. Larissa was like that, surrounded now by a bevy of boys, actors that she used to hold in contempt, squinting students, all excited, perspiring, shrieking at each other. One month she had two lovers at the same time, a comic rhymester and a versifier, a student who called himself a poet of genius and Pushkin an ignoramus. The rhymester began, of course, to boast of his success—well, I just socked him on his shaven jaw and, adding 5,000 roubles to this, told him to go to Kaluga. I chose that dreary, bleak little town on purpose. He went. Those were the worst years of my life. I would leave her sometimes in the evening and roam all night in the streets until dawn, watchman of my treasure, but the treasure was stolen from me—it was in another man's hands. Walking in



silence, carrying along my heart filled with bitterness and longing, I could not help thinking: What is the point of living without happiness, with an unrequited love? I would peer in at the windows of houses. In each house there would be someone who was loved, while there was I, hungry and miserable in my loneliness. How many nights like that did I live through? It is hard for a lonely man to drag his shadow along the earth on a moonlit night.

By then, Larissa had started playing in low comedy, walking about the stage half-naked, showing off her legs and her breasts. I almost went insane, begged her:

"Let us go abroad!"

No, she wouldn't. I wrote to the doctor in Switzerland, asking him to help me persuade her. His answer was unsatisfactory and almost derisive. I did not understand what he meant; only the footnote remained in my memory because of its puerility:

"Leo Tolstoy said: The sense of immortality is a sickness of the brain. I say: Love is the sickness of the imagination. Rabbits and guinea-pigs treat love in the only normal manner."

He put it in a stupid way, somehow. That's another unpleasant habit that I have noticed with educated people: they've hoarded a great variety of thoughts and whether it is because they like to boast of them, as merchants boast of money, or because they find it hard to keep them to themselves, they let them loose, as—forgive me—a peasant does his lice. Surely one should treat thoughts with caution, for nobody really knows which are right and which are wrong. Often a thought is to a man like a needle rolled into bread is to a dog; the dog swallows the bread and suffers agonies, maybe dies. Even I, a suspicious man, feel sometimes the poison of other people's thoughts, and voice other words than my own. A man does not live by his thoughts, but by irrational desire. The brain, intrusive teacher, dictates to him:

NOWHERE TO GO.

And the pupil writes:

KNOW WHERE TO GO.

I wrote this once at school, during a lesson, and the teacher said to me:

"You fool! I'm teaching you grammar and you start philosophising."

Yes, it was hideous to watch Larissa's antics. I kept thinking to myself: where is her pride, her magnificence? It made me weep, it drove me to despair to see her show her body on the stage, like a beggar his sores, soliciting charity. It came to the point when she began even to pay attention to me—that was the most painful, most bitter thing of all. She would put her arms around me and whisper:

"Eaten you up, haven't I, Peter darling? Well, come and kiss me, come and forgive me. . . ."

And I kissed her. With clenched teeth, almost in tears, I would kiss her and even do my best to give her pleasure, anything only to draw her away from the mire she had got herself in. I could see that she suffered too, reluctant to give away her soul into the power of unsatisfied flesh. Her face had aged slightly, she would not be photographed as readily as before, but her body was avid and like a girl's.

And I was over forty and my virility was burnt out, had gone rusty. Frightening and humiliating it is to recall Larissa's fits of love-making. Oh, God, what it is given to a man to bear! At times when she would drop off to sleep, I would sit looking at her, whispering wildly:

"Is it you? Is it really you?"

Behind the windows the snowstorm howled, the frost creaked, the moon shone, I could hardly endure them, either winter or summer, these moonlit nights that laid everything bare. They chased away sleep and invited clear, cold thinking, damn them!

I cannot understand how I emptied and drained to the dregs that misery of mine without going insane. I do not know how Larissa made peace with her soul, meekly surrendering to the torment of a belated passion. I went on my knees to her, urging her to go away with me. She wouldn't. One could not tear her away from that cesspool, from the theatre, as you can't drag a drunk from a public house. Everybody laughed at her, openly, mercilessly, and she was, of course, aware of it. So she started drinking more. There appeared a strange fear in her attitude to people and a sort of foxy manner, an unctuousness; she would try to curry favour with everyone and

“speak to me only of her successes. Every evening I would hear the same thing:

“Do you remember in Pskov? And in Kherson, Peter?”

I listened to her and to please her would add fuel to her lies, invent some more. She saw through it all and would suddenly remain silent, look at me and throw her arms round my neck.

“Dearest, how you love me!”

“Yes,” I said. “I love you. Don’t you trouble yourself about anything.”

And she:

“Of all the mockeries man has to suffer from fate, there is none more destructive than an unrequited love.”

She meant the doctor, of course. But I did not believe that she really loved him—it was just . . . the last reckoning of her soul. A dream. A phantasy.

At forty-four she began to develop dangerous heart trouble, and the doctors told me that she might die at any moment, snap out—just like that. At last I persuaded her to go abroad. She wanted to be near the sea. We settled down near San Sebastian, took a small house right by the sea. I fitted it up nicely, as though saying: “Well, Larissa, it’s yours to die in.” It was lovely out there, at the land’s end, and people who speak a strange language always seem better than one’s own—for you can’t understand what they say. Only the nights terrified me—they set in so suddenly, these nights; as soon as the sun sinks into the water, they float in from the mountains, crush the earth and the sea. On silent nights this emptiness under the stars and the infinite boredom of the ocean overwhelmed and stupified me. The drone of the ocean, the howl of the surf, oppressed me with their absurdity. You would look out of the window and see something dark rolling on to the beach, like a herd of white-maned horses being chased; the herd gallops along wildly and suddenly jumps on to the earth, strikes it, the earth gives a sigh and our little house shakes to its foundations, and the window-panes wail. Still, it was better when there was movement and noise; it’s the silent nights that were unbearable. I used to remember Kolia’s words about our earth, overcome with sorrow, and the guilty, wrathful speeches of the doctor. Overlooked is our earth by the wisdom of God, overlooked among the stars, and the

people on it are lonely and hostile to each other. When you think about all this it becomes penetratingly clear how deeply a man needs the woman he loves. Larissa was right: with whom can one better forget one's loneliness? On such nights, my love for her sank infinitely deep into its darkness. I would lie in bed, or walk barefoot up and down my room, waiting for the ocean to sigh and then to hear Larissa's last cry. Perhaps she had called already and I had not heard? I would open the door into her room, stand on the threshold, listening for her breathing. Usually I would find her sitting up in bed, leaning against the pillows, all in white as though enveloped in foam, sitting up, her eyes closed, motionless, listening to the noise of the sea, and there was such meekness in her, such despair. She was clever, she knew she was dying, but her pride prevented her from talking about it. I would sit down on the floor, by the door, smothered in grief, half alive, half dead, and sit like that for two or three hours. Sometimes aware that I was not asleep, Larissa would call me:

"Peter, my dear, come. Sit with me a little. . . ."

And she would begin:

"Do you remember in Kursk? What a reception they gave me!"

I remembered, of course, all that she wanted me to remember.

"Wonderful," I said. "All your life was wonderful."

When she grew tired and silent, I would bury my face at her feet and, lying down, silently pray to her:

"My happiness, my love, don't die."

One night, she said sadly:

"Heavens, how quickly you are getting grey!"

Seeing that it upset her, I dyed my hair a little. It is unbearable, my dear sir, to live only to see the slow death of the woman you love. In this paralysis of the soul, I lived for two hundred and eight days, and on the two hundred and ninth, Larissa died. On the terrace. It was a sultry, quiet day; even the ocean was still. In the morning, she said:

"I feel remarkably light today."

She came out on the terrace, sat down on the chair, looking as usual in silence at the empty movement of the sea. Her nurse, Agatha, brought her some flowers. She stroked them

with her dear hands, buried her face in them and rose suddenly, seized the banister, swayed. I just managed to catch her in my arms . . .

The man got up, looked around wildly and, pushing his hands into his pockets, leant against the stove.

"That is all. There, in the small churchyard by the hill, I buried her. I did not want to take her to Russia where she had not been happy. For more than a year I could not make myself return here, where the only food of my soul had been unhappiness."

He glanced at me with a frown and continued, sternly:

"Don't think for a moment, however, that I have been complaining about Larissa. No, I told you the story only because you seemed to wish to hear it. It is useless to complain: a man remains deaf to his fellow-men, like a stone."

Against the white enamel of the stove, his face was dark, especially under the eyes. He stood with his eyes shut, very straight and somehow grown thinner during the night. The thread of rain behind the window sparkled more clearly; the tired light of the lantern grew dimmer. From afar the church bells purred like brass pigeons: they were ringing for Mass in the monastery.

The man continued in a reluctant, low voice:

"Later on, I came back to Russia after all, and took this flat because Larissa had lived opposite and everything had started here. I had her photographs printed and am selling the postcards; not for profit, of course, just like that. . . ."

He stretched out his lean arm and pointed to the vase in the corner with the bunch of dry flowers.

"These are the flowers she last held in her hands—but . . . they are gone! I was told to put them in lime water to preserve them—it didn't help. I had them enamelled—that didn't help either. They only lost their natural appearance."

He went to the corner, with great care touched the hideous lumps, dirty grey in colour, with his slender fingers, and said in a hoarse voice:

"The flowers are crumbling to ashes, and there is no way of arresting their decay. . . ."

# THE STORY OF A NOVEL



## *The Story of a Novel*

THE guests had finally gone, the husband had left with them, and the servants, wearied by the excitement of the last few busy days, retired out of sight. The house seemed to sink into the depths of the park, where the long, unbroken silence was particularly impressive and aroused, as always, a longing in the woman's heart to play the silent game of imagination and reminiscence.

She was twenty-seven, small, fair and slender, with an oval face pale as ivory; her eyes, the colour of waves, were a trifle too large for that face, and their expression made her look a little older than her years. They were carefully hidden under long eyelashes and glanced about with mingled distrust and expectancy.

There are women who are always expecting something: in their girlhood they imperiously await the coming of the man who is to love them, but when he comes and tells them of his love, though they listen earnestly, but without apparent perturbation, their eyes seem to say: "This is all very natural, but what next?" It would be a mistake to consider such women cold and calculating. After marriage they faithfully love their husbands, while they patiently await the coming of another love, perhaps even a "guilty" one, but different. Such women often go off with another man, leaving a short note scribbled in pencil with a steady hand: "Forgive me, Paul, but I cannot live with you any longer." They do not always say: "Forgive me." With the other man they sometimes lead a gay and exciting, sometimes a hard and miserable existence for which they are not prepared; but in either case they still expect something more to happen. They say little, their conversation is uninteresting, they do not care to philosophise aloud; they disapprove of all the inevitable tragedies of their lives and regard them with the calm distaste of squeamish people. They are reluctant to bear children. When



important events occur, their strange eyes seem to enquire silently:

"And is that all?"

Then the eyes darken into an obstinate frown, and add:  
"No, it is not possible!"

And once again they wait until all desire is gone except for a deep healthy slumber or oblivion obtained in some other way. . . .

The heroine of the romance which I am merely describing here because I would be unable to write it as well as I would have liked, was one of those not particularly pleasant women. Wrapping her shoulders in a soft Penza shawl, she stepped out on to the verandah of her summer villa and sat down in a squeaking garden chair. The purple leaves of the maple and the yellow leaves of the birch lay scattered about her feet on the three steps leading to the semi-circular terrace. A reddish sky glimmered through the trees and a keen transparent autumnal stillness pervaded the air, ingeniously broken by the quiet harmony of a string chorus of titmice. The pale circle of the moon stood motionless in the pearly zenith of the sky.

Half closing her eyes, she began to set her soul in order: the guests, and her husband, had clotted it up with endless speeches on Tolstoy and duck-shooting, the beauty of old Russian ikons, the inevitability of the Revolution, Anatole France, old china, and the mysterious soul of woman, with the latest and once more unsuccessful novel of the writer Antip Fomine—and a host of other matters. All had to be swept away, cast from the memory. Only a small residue was worthy of the woman's careful and affectionate consideration.

Right across one of the planks of the floor of the verandah you could see the deep mark of a blow evidently dealt by some sharp implement. That is where Fomine had killed a snake with a little hatchet sometimes used to break large lumps of sugar. He was a heavy, clumsy man, but at that moment he had shown the dexterity of a cat and such great enthusiasm that the killing of a snake might have been his one ambition. He hit the snake so hard that he had shattered the hatchet.

On the night of that same day, here on the verandah, he had read the beginning of his novel. It was about a man who had made earnest attempts to discover whether he was a good fellow or a cad, and having committed many actions, both good and evil, failed to understand anything about himself and died, finally, alone in sorrow and dreariness, a stranger to his own soul.

The author merely described his hero's death, but he read the first four chapters of his novel, telling how young Paul Volkoff had come to see his sister at her country place where he was seized with an unconquerable aversion for the woman's husband, a coarse cynic who looked upon himself as an energetic exponent of culture.

The woman had thought these chapters dull; only the description of the summer night was beautiful; vivid, too, the picture of the hero who, in an attempt to wound the woman who had left him for another, tried to compose resentful verses as he sat on a bench in the park. Only two lines, however, had materialised :

"The moon shines, rejoicing in the light of her rays,  
And lies like a woman with two lovers . . ."

He cursed himself for his lack of inspiration, but failed to compose any more.

On this occasion, Fomine had made love to her more persistently than ever before; he spoke thrillingly of his loneliness when he was among people, and about the people themselves. But she already knew how seldom one meets a man who in talking to an attractive and desirable woman fails to speak of his solitude; she was aware that few people cared to boast of their happiness. The more attentively she listened, the more intangible Fomine seemed to become; she had at last been penetrated by the strange notion that he was not a man at all, but a stage on which an endless and incomprehensible drama was being performed. He had a striking appearance: he stood out among other men, a stolid, ugly man with high cheek-bones, absent-minded, childishly careless about himself. He watched her with a warm glance in his soft grey eyes, and spoke in a hoarse but faltering voice. Knowing that he had this defect, he adorned his conversation with rich mimicry and

gesticulations, sometimes even stamping his feet like a pianist pressing the pedals. At the same time it seemed as though he were not present himself, but that in his place was a crowd of men, women, children, peasants and officials, all speaking with his voice, saying odd, contradictory, dull, terrible things, and sometimes shamelessly clever ones. But where Fomine himself was among this multitude, and what he was really like, it was hard to understand.

Of his love he spoke to the woman in the simple words of a youth who feels for the first time the power of that force which transfigures the soul. A few days later he spoke of it again, that time with the cynicism of a man who no longer believes in himself and embarks upon an ultimate test: will his infatuation for a woman help to deaden the acute discontent within his heart? It was clear to her that he was neither simple nor cynical, kind nor unkind, and not as clever as he was gifted; she felt that the source of his discontent lay in an unsatisfied ambition. She finally adopted a cautious and suspicious attitude towards him, because he did not really exist. His physical self was there, but not the essential thing, not what could be called his—that is, Fomine's—soul, as if it had been blurred by being painted in different colours. He was not a man, he was a movable theatre in which the manager and all the players were impersonated in one character. Very interesting, of course, but unsafe, unsteady.

The woman smiled, glancing toward the park, amused by the idea that suddenly coursed through her mind: it was impossible, of course, to love a whole assembly of men at the same time, though it might be interesting to surrender to many in the person of one. Still, a woman should never love a writer if she wants to avoid crippling herself, never! Thus disposing of Fomine as a man, she felt some irritation with the author, but this was immediately to give way to a sensation of utter amazement.

She was looking toward the park, her eyes half closed. There, among the branches of the birch-trees, shadows appeared, clearly outlined against the purple sunset, while on the bench sat a man in a white suit wearing a panama hat and swinging a cane.

Who can that be, she wondered? Everyone has gone. And

in a white suit, too, at this time of year! Surely all her friends had gone, she reminded herself. But it was unpleasantly obvious that someone had not gone. Or perhaps it was some stranger who had stepped into the park to admire the reflection of the sun on the pond? But why the summer suit? There he was, tracing figures on the ground with his stick. It seemed to the woman that she heard the rustling of the dry leaves. A moment later she decided to send her maid to inquire who the stranger might be.

When she rose, her chair squeaked loudly. The sound penetrated the stillness, but the man didn't seem to hear it. Then she descended the steps to the cold ground and walked along the path, noticing that her approach to him was unwontedly rapid, but that he himself grew no larger or more distinct than he had been at a distance. It was, no doubt, one of the many tricks played by twilight. But, stranger still, the man, though he had the red light of the dying sun directly upon him, cast no shadow. The leaves he was raking together made no sound, seemed indeed not even to stir when he touched them. Then she felt as though she were suddenly seized in the embrace of an invisible power that led her round in a slow waltz.

The man rose to meet her, took off his hat politely, though a little awkwardly, bowed, and asked in a low rustling voice:

"Forgive me—but is that you?"

He was young, smartly dressed, but rather colourless. He had a long, dry face, blue eyes and a small flaxen beard. There was something unnaturally transparent, glassy, in his rigid features. He was like none of her friends, and yet she felt she had met him before.

"What a strange question," she said, laughing. "Of course it's I."

He returned a mechanical smile and his face became pathetic.

"So you really are the woman I am supposed to meet!" Then he added, striking his cane noiselessly across his leg: "Though I am not positive that I *am* to meet a woman here . . ."

She looked fixedly at him. She had seen eyes like his in portraits. It required an effort of the imagination to believe

they were alive. The man is evidently embarrassed, she thought. There is some riddle here. He is doubtless one of those mysterious friends of her husband, or of Vera Ivanovna, hiding from the police. Politics, in one word. But what an absurd disguise!

"Do you come from Vera Ivanovna?" she asked, and he replied with a question:

"Is she, too, in the novel?"

"What do you mean, in the novel?"

The man shook his head. "I don't remember any woman of that name in it."

"In what?"

"In the novel."

"A lunatic!" flashed across her mind.

Wrapping herself more tightly in the folds of her shawl, she enquired drily:

"I don't know what novel you are talking about, but I think I have a right to enquire, who are *you*?"

He looked at her intently. His eyes, that seemed painted on the surface of his face, expressed obvious astonishment. His lips curved into a smile and he nodded in acquiescence:

"Of course it is your right. I think the novel begins at this very moment, with this meeting. I suppose the author intended it to be this way: at first you treat me with suspicion, almost hostility, and then—well, I don't know, but so far as I'm concerned, a new tragedy will begin for me."

"Yes, a lunatic," was her unspoken comment as she listened to his slow colourless words and watched his face. It seemed a little more alive, less flat. As for herself, she experienced a strange sensation, as though she were falling asleep. But she was interested and wished to hear more, without interrupting him.

"I am simply amazed that you should ask about the novel," he went on. "Tell me, you are not trying to mystify me, are you? You *are* the woman? You have some connection with Fomine, or rather with his novel, haven't you?"

She found it hard to repress a laugh. She at once grasped the situation. Ah, so it's Fomine! He knew I would be alone. He couldn't come himself, so he staged this mystery!

"Yes," she said with a smile, "I know the novel. But what about it?"

The man became still more pleasantly animated, and said:

"Then everything is all right. But I never thought it would be so difficult . . ."

Then, almost graciously, he added with a smile, "Of course, you must be the right woman, or I should never have met you."

"It's getting cold and damp," she said. "Suppose we go indoors?"

The man bowed and thanked her, still smiling. He did have a strange smile; it appeared on his face as though not from within but from without. He walked with a wonderfully light step in his white shoes; under him, no leaf rustled. But, strangest of all, he had no shadow. The woman's shadow, on the other hand, was long and clearly defined; it crawled, darted, vacillated, now on one side, now on the other of the narrow path.

"How does he manage it?" she wondered, watching him out of the corner of her eye. He seemed all at once to have become unnaturally flat.

"Have you seen Fomine recently?" she enquired.

In some surprise he replied, glancing at her:

"About two years ago."

"What a poor sense of humour he has," she thought, and aloud she said: "You are dressed rather lightly for the season."

"Why, that's Fomine's fault," he answered with a shrug.

"You see, I was cast for a part during the summer . . ."

She was feeling decidedly uneasy and bored.

"Who are you, anyway?" she asked once again, and once again, as after her question about Fomine, the man was astonished. Lashing the air with his cane—and she heard no whistling sound—he laughed an ugly artificial laugh.

"How strange you should ask that! Can you have forgotten? Let me remind you: I am Paul Volkoff, son of an engineer, and I am myself a civil engineer; an idle fellow, a failure in life. I am thirty-two and rich. Six years ago I married for love, and four years later my wife deserted me, leaving a note written in pencil: 'Forgive me, Paul, but I

cannot live with you any longer.' At present she is somewhere in the Caucasus, but I believe I am not supposed to meet her again. I'm not a positive character. . . . That is all I know about myself. The rest is not yet written, not created . . ."

He spoke his speech as if he were reading a passport; only at the end did the woman detect a note of irritation and revolt. She, too, was a trifle irritated as she thought:

"If he is not a lunatic who imagines himself the hero of Fomine's unsuccessful novel, he is just a stupid man without much imagination."

As they were mounting the steps to the porch, she turned to him and asked:

"How do you manage not to cast a shadow?"

"What use have I for a shadow?" he demanded in surprise. "You never see shadows in dreams, do you? And all this is like a dream."

"What is like a dream?"

"This existence of ours, people artificially created for the amusement of people really existing."

He spoke these words so simply that the woman had a suspicion: "I may be mistaken and he is a very subtle and clever actor. Then it becomes more understandable that Fomine should have sent him to me."

"Ah, that's what it is!" she exclaimed, laughing. "You are not a real person?"

Then suddenly she lowered her eyes, embarrassed. He was looking at her in open astonishment. He appeared to be shaken and tossed by a wind she did not feel. The unnatural movements of his body reminded her of a sheet fluttering in a draught of air.

"How extraordinary you should ask me that!" he said. "Really, I think you are mystifying me. Or possibly Fomine created you still more carelessly than he did me, and you have forgotten your part, your mission? Or is it that you have become real by some strange device not accessible to me? Or, finally, Fomine perhaps wrote you up to the end and forgot all about me? You may be a completely consummated character?"

"Yes, he is indeed an accomplished actor," she mused, listening to his troubled speech.

She felt that she was sinking into a dream against her will and must make an effort to overcome the sensation.

"You don't answer?" he said. "I should like to believe your silence means that you are remembering? Is that the case?"

She nodded. He went on:

"Let me remind you of the beginning of the novel."

"I know it."

"Well, then?"

A short pause, then a soft exclamation:

"Ah, I understand. Fomine doubtless forgot to bring us together, or perhaps introduced some other man in my place. What I can't understand, though, is your appearing not to know what our relationship is and what you are intended to do."

The moment had come when the woman's curiosity became awakened. It helped to conquer her confusion, and instantly suggested the attitude that she was to adopt.

"No," she said, "it is your part I don't quite understand. Tell me about yourself."

"But I have already told all I know."

"So you don't exist—as it were?"

"No," he said petulantly. "The trouble is that I *do* exist! For you, of course, I exist until Fomine decides otherwise, but at the same time I already exist independently of him."

"I see: just as Hamlet and Don Quixote exist independently of their creators!"

Volkoff bowed his head and continued:

"Yes, approximately. But naturally, Fomine is not Cervantes, still less Shakespeare. And besides, I am not a finished character. All in all, I find myself in a most absurd situation. Just think, I've been sitting on that bench for two years! You must admit that is absurd. Days, nights, dawns, sunsets, dust, heat, summers, autumn rains, snow, winter storm—all come and go, and I sit waiting. Sometimes people passed by, real people, and talked about unnecessary and uninteresting things. Once a little freckled fellow in a silk suit tried to seduce a little fat lady by telling her that luscious pineapple-melons grew in his greenhouse and, in the meantime, nibbled her ear just like a horse would do, and she shrieked gently.



How unspeakably stupid it all is, how tiresome, and how absurd! One sits and thinks: how boring, how foolish and diffuse real people can be, and how much more interesting we imaginary creatures are! We are always more spiritually concentrated, we have more poetry and romance about us. And to think that we exist solely for the amusement of these dull, real people!"

He spoke as if he felt a sincere sense of injury, and his dry face became a little softer, more attractive. But perhaps that was due to the warm dusk in the room.

"Naturally, I don't quite know what real people are like, and besides, what is reality? For example, this room and everything in it—is that reality? Or is it something else, like you and me? The aura, the fruit of Fomine's imagination?"

She passed her hand gently over her face, glanced furtively about, and murmured:

"All this is very interesting, but somewhat fatiguing."

"Of course it is fatiguing," he returned. "But, you know, as for myself, during the two years of idleness and immobility while I've been waiting for Fomine to complete me, to launch me into life for people's entertainment, I seem to have grown stronger, acquired substance and, in my structure, come closer to a real being. Yes, I am almost real . . ."

The woman felt uncomfortable and she wanted to say so to her strange, obviously insane visitor, but at that moment the maid appeared in the doorway and stood there gaping like a fish on the end of a line.

"What is it, Glasha?"

"You called?"

"I? No."

"I am sorry. I thought I heard you speak?"

"Certainly. Don't you see . . . ?"

She rose, looked about and opened and closed her eyes in wonder. Volkoff, who had been standing with his back to the window, was nowhere visible. Through the window-pane, dim in the twilight, she could see the leaves slowly dropping in the green air from the motionless boughs of the maples. She looked out of the window until her eyes began to smart, and imagined at last that she perceived a fine dark thread cut across the window-pane.

"Yes," she said, with some annoyance. "I did speak. I called you. Bring the tea."

The moment Glasha had left, she began to reflect:

"I suppose this is what is called hallucination of the sight and hearing, a complex form. I wonder why it happened to me? Strange . . ."

She sank into a chair, stretched out her feet and covered them with a rug.

"I must write to Fomine about it. It may give him a new theme to write about. Though I am not sure—it's not in his line."

She realised how incoherently these thoughts were coursing through her brain, and she was thankful the nightmare was over.

"Well, as I was saying . . ." She heard the same rustling voice and the man stood at the window as before, stroking his forehead with one hand and balancing his hat with the other.

"Excuse me," she said, in an irritated tone. "Where were you when the maid was here?"

He opened his eyes wide and moved a step toward her. With a swift, forbidding gesture, she stretched out her hand to him.

"Why, I was right here by your side," he said, stopping and raising his shoulders clumsily. "I see you lost sight of me. That was because I was standing sidewise: that way I'm flat as a card or a picture. Have you forgotten? But you, too, are made that way."

"No!" she protested indignantly. "No, no!"

"How difficult you are to get along with," he said with a sigh.

It sounded as if he were echoing her irritation, but his features were immobile, exactly like the features in a picture. An occasional shadow seemed to flit over his pale cheeks, leaving them exactly as they were. It seemed, like his unpleasant smile, to come from somewhere beyond him. He was strangely like a reflection on the water, rippling here and there with the breeze.

"How does he do it?" she wondered, gazing at him with concentration, and suddenly ordered him to stand a little to

the left. Glancing at her, he moved noiselessly and stood in front of the mirror. There was no reflection. The mirror, darkening slightly, did not show his grey figure in the twilight.

"Hallucination! That's what it is!" she decided.

"You are a very difficult person," Volkoff continued. "I see you are again in doubt; you haven't the courage to take me for what I am. I don't believe that this attitude of yours is according to Fomine's original plan. Besides . . ."

He swayed to and fro and then seemed to be floating up in the air as he went on:

"Besides, I feel I am now sufficiently real to continue the unfinished novel on my own initiative and risk. I refuse to go on with this life of idleness and waiting. I am not going to sit on that garden bench any longer in all kinds of weather, listening to conversations about melons, to the end of time, to the destruction of matter and its manifestations. Fomine created me and then forgot all about me. I have heard that God does that with real people, but He doubtless has good reasons to justify His . . . rather incomprehensible experiments. But Fomine, so far as I know, is a very ordinary, aggressive and conceited little fellow, awkwardly imitating God in His human game of chess with partner unknown. You know, I think he's insane. You should see him when he is alone! He fills his room with the creatures of his imagination and, surrounded with a host of phantoms as insane as himself, does not know what to do with them. He is a raving maniac. For these past two years of my semi-phantom life, I have thought a great deal about him, and I am amazed at the mad ambition of the man. Just think, he is surely aware that, like other artists, he complicates and tangles up life in an impossible way, fills it with imaginary figures. And what, after all, are they? Essentially persons and things belonging to reality, but distorted according to the tastes and inclinations of these conjurers of words and phrases. More than that, they, too, are the creatures of the imagination of someone or something else, set in motion for the amusement of real people, but they don't see that! Do you realise that they don't see it? There are, indeed, no monsters at which real people mock so cruelly as at these creators of phantasy sown in the fields of reality,

ostensibly for the purpose of adorning them. Don't you think life would be more simple and comfortable, less crowded with contradictory elements, if it were not for these Don Quixotes, Fausts and Hamlets? Just consider it."

Volkoff delivered this long harangue with great animation and a certain amount of sarcasm, and with the self-assurance and wisdom possessed among real people only by literary critics. It is always a token of ineradicable spiritual ignorance. He swayed strangely on his feet, undulating like a mirage, though his silhouette retained the outline of a human being. But round the woman everything swam, and she was intoxicated with a strange curiosity.

"Yes," he repeated, "I have determined to continue the novel on my own initiative. I need only to find a woman—rather, convince you that I am the man Fomine intended for you."

He looked at her enquiringly, and added with annoyance:

"In this accursed world, it is stupidly ordained that a man cannot make a simple step without a woman. Life, too, would be very boring without her . . ."

"If I understand you correctly," she said slowly, and then stopped as though prompted by a vague but insistent notion that filled her with a curious warmth.

"Yes?" he enquired, pressingly, bending over her; and, when the maid entered with tea, this time he did not disappear.

"Two cups, Glasha."

"Two?"

"Of course . . ."

With a nod in the direction of the departing maid, Volkoff enquired:

"Is she, too, a creature of Fomine's imagination?"

In order to avoid answering him, she bowed her head. Volkoff assumed that she had answered in the affirmative.

"I can't make out why one should choose such an ugly shape for one's imagination."

"Will you have some tea?"

He straightened himself and said with a melancholy air:

"I wonder you don't offer me brandy or vodka! It is quite clear that Fomine has not put the finishing touch to you."

You don't know how to behave with me. That is why we are both playing a farce instead of acting a novel. I really don't know what I am to do. In order to achieve complete realisation, I must have a woman, and obviously that woman is you. But you evidently don't know your role, don't understand it—or else, as I say, Fomine sketched you even more carelessly than he did me. Finally, you won't even believe your own eyes and I have no means of convincing you that I am neither phantom nor an hallucination, nor (please realise this) the creature of your phantasy. No, not yours, but Fomine's, don't you see?"

She saw that it was all impossible rubbish, a mad idea, and I trust that my intelligent reader agrees with her. Only in that instance, however! I have known my intelligent reader now for thirty years as a terribly strong-minded individual, and my esteem for his reason is strengthened by my knowledge of that stoic obstinacy whereby he manages to forget the sordid uselessness of his hard, almost martyr-like existence.

I am filled with emotion when I see the respect with which the reader regards the fantastically inconvenient reality he has himself created. I am filled with admiration for the possessive horror felt by the reader every time the author's rebellious imagination raises in vain its bold but futile voice against reality, that strong and tightly-woven net of innumerable absurdities that drags off the reader to be pickled like herring in brine. I respect my reader because he, my infinitely supple and patient material, does not protest when I try at the cost of my imagination to make him better, more interesting and more intelligent than he is in reality.

This digression is, of course, unpardonable, but I was driven to it by a sentimental desire to pay a sincere compliment to the reader, and praise is always welcome at any time, anywhere. But let us continue the story of the novel that was not written.

As we have already observed, the woman did not believe in all this, but she determined to treat the situation in all earnestness, not only for fear that she might be on the verge of madness—oh, no, but . . . a vague thought was beginning to materialise in her brain.

"After all," she mused, "why should not I do what Fomine does? Creating characters out of one's imagination can't be as difficult or as dangerous as bearing children!"

Looking thoughtfully at her visitor, she said:

"So far as I remember, Fomine's novel . . ."

She stopped, and then continued with a smile:

"How is it done? How did he create you?"

With the same smile, only glued from without to the surface of his face, Volkoff answered softly:

"I really can't tell you. I suddenly felt, understood somehow, that I existed, that my name was Paul Volkoff, that I had fair hair, and so on. My unsuccessful and unhappy romance can be explained, I think, by the fact that I am a meditative man, fond of analysis, and that I am preoccupied chiefly with myself. The rest, the so-called external world, is only an object for me to meditate upon, a source of meditation. It makes me retire into myself, but on the other hand, something inside my soul is always trying to force itself out. I am designed for a very agitated, restless life, and in the end, I think, I will realise myself amidst the chaos of various manifestations, gather myself into a whole, into something very sharp, and penetrate easily into the depth of all mysteries. It seems to me now that I did already exist before Fomine conceived me, but rather as an agglomeration of dissociated fragments, representing even less of a whole than I am now, something not linked by thought, feeling or desire, that would indicate my aim. That is all I can tell you about myself."

The woman, somewhat reassured, reflected:

"He is just an ordinary man. And particularly modest. I am not going out of my mind at all. I am simply the witness of something I don't understand. And, besides, there's a trick about it somewhere."

Volkoff went on: "I was evidently created because Fomine wanted me to exemplify some truth of his. Surely the imagination of writers is always thrust into life for the establishment of truths, don't you think?"

She dared not say yes. This man, after all, was a total stranger to her, perhaps even a suspicious character. Why should she disclose to him the little mysteries of the world? What if another world inhabited by people of two dimensions

like Japanese mice, really existed? She wisely concluded that if he were an ordinary mortal, he was bound to disclose it the moment she began flirting with him. She therefore pulled one of her attractive ankles from under the rug and swinging it in full view—

"I remember," she said, "that Fomine's conception of you was precisely like the description you have just given me."

"I am glad," he replied. "It is a very difficult role, but I'm glad you say that. Once one has been created, there is nothing to do but go on living."

"Yes," she acquiesced, after a moment's reflection. "Later, it is true, you must meet one of those women who are always waiting for something to come into their lives, always making up their minds and always acting unexpectedly, exactly in the opposite way to what they had decided. To the end of their days, at least until they are old, life seems inexhaustible, yet they lack the eagerness and daring to seize blindly upon the pleasures of life. They seem to think that just beyond or beside them, after all that has already been experienced, the greatest, the sweetest pleasure is still hidden. To discover it, to delight in it spiritually and physically, is their highest aspiration. I am sure I am not that kind of woman, and when Fomine created you, he wasn't thinking of me in relation to you. Though you know, these writers . . ."

Volkoff made a gesture of indignation.

"Yes, I know what you mean. Terrible! Criminal frivolity! You can't conceive how many such unfinished, hideous, imaginary beings there are like you and me!"

"Really!" She was a little offended, and added dubiously: "Hideous?"

He did not bother to answer her, but continued speaking with an animation that looked more and more human, though he spoke in a tone of complaint:

"They think that a creation of theirs, once set on paper, is the end of the matter. They forget that only the outline remains on the page, while the image itself is thrust into the world to exist there, as you and I exist, a psycho-physical emanation, the result of the dissociation of the atoms of the brain and of nerve force, something more real than ether. But you know that, of course?"

"Oh, of course. But why don't you sit down at the table?"

He approached her and seated himself, as any other man would have done. It was clear that her little tricks had passed unnoticed. With a sigh she tried to imagine herself in a world of half-complete beings, but could not, because she instantly saw before her the whole circle of her acquaintances, among whom she had not yet succeeded in finding the man she needed, who would be as perfect as a musical instrument in the hands of a musical genius. She knew that the ideal man was one who not only satisfied her slightest wishes the moment they came into being, but one who divined them beforehand, incited them. Without asking questions, he would know all the replies. He need not talk much, but he must feel everything, understand all, and never blame her unless she wished to feel guilty. Meantime, she listened attentively to the low tones of her visitor's voice:

"And now we are confronted with something inevitable. Fomine filled me with certain psychological material, and I sprang into existence, but the moment after I realised this, I felt that there were other superfluous thoughts and characteristics penetrating me from the outside, in contradiction to what was already within me. Though I realised that this was disfiguring me, I could do nothing to eliminate it, for at that time I had no genuine instinct for life, and Fomine was clouded by a thick emanation of psycho-physical matter. This, as you know, is something so solid and at the same time elastic that it would have destroyed me had I attempted to reach Fomine's consciousness."

"It is possible," the woman thought, "that this creature is not yet an actual human being, only its embryo, and I might be able to complete him by giving him what a perfect man needs. Pygmalion's task was no more difficult."

She shut her eyes, listening to Volkoff's voice, so strangely transparent that it did not interrupt the train of her thoughts. It dulled no other sound. It did not prevent her hearing the shepherd Kirka playing the accordion in the village, the girls singing and the dogs barking as usual at the moon—the moon, so respectable and bright, almost like a sun whose rays had been smoothly brushed back.



"And now I can no more understand how much I owe to Fomine, my creator, and how much to the other characters which he has created and mixed up with me. I also feel some of his thoughts within me, thoughts that have no relation to me as the hero of his novel or to the novel in general. I have already told you that Fomine is a miniature madhouse in himself, or, if you prefer, a highroad on which different characters are always roaming, where thoughts and ideas, contradictory and mutually exclusive, flow uninterruptedly. For instance, I cannot believe that nature does not know what she wants, and that, able to produce anything, she creates an incredible amount of redundant ugliness. That's another of Fomine's aphorisms that is of no use to me. I carry about thousands of ridiculous ones like that. But possibly that was why I was created, simply to be the bearer of ridiculous trifles? I don't even know the chief point: am I supposed to be a good man or a scoundrel?"

She extended a hand to him, smiling:

"That is precisely what you must not know," she said. "The whole interest and meaning of your life lies in that, that you, a man, should be bad at distinguishing good from evil."

"You really think so?" he asked suspiciously, pulling at one of the buttons of his flannel coat.

"Yes, that is the way I understand your part in the story. If you knew good from evil, life for you would be a terrible bore. This way it's far more interesting."

Volkoff pondered over this. He was puzzled about something. It was also unnatural that he should pay no heed to her extended hand, as any other man would have done.

"Ye-es," he said, "but interesting to whom?"

"To me. To you. To the reader, as well . . ."

"Hm! To the reader?" He passed his hand over his hair and eyes, and then, shaking his head, said with a smile: "Don't you think this a rather cruel game? Only think: we are made to suffer countless miseries, we are set against each other like — forgive me — like dogs, tossed about like playthings, in order to create dramatic situations, simply that the reader, who happens to be chronically bored, may be amused. Is it not almost too witty that some should suffer in order that

others may be amused? This may be Fomine's idea, not mine. But it's a fine idea, I assure you! On the whole he is a decent chap. Not presumptuous, and that's a sure sign of decency, I think. Sometimes he throws down his pen and asks: 'Why am I doing this? Why do I write?' He, personally, does not like suffering. It is repulsive to him. Unfortunately, artists have no other material at their disposal but suffering . . ."

The woman moved her chair closer to him, and asked:

"Tell me, how *do* you perform these tricks with your shadow in that mirror?"

But immediately she felt like a sportsman whose gun goes off unexpectedly, against his will. She was a bit disconcerted and then laid a gentle hand on her visitor's arm.

"Don't be angry," she said.

But her hand felt only a rough knitted table cloth under it. This was decidedly unpleasant—even uncanny. But when she heard a voice speak in tones of anger, she was terrified.

"So you are just an ordinary real flesh-and-blood woman? Why this mystification?"

Volkoff rose, swung his hat about with a curious motion, and repeated in angry amazement:

"What is the sense of this mystification?"

He undulated towards the porch and stood for a few seconds in the doorway fluctuating in the moonlight.

"Look here," she said, coming up to him slowly, "this is too incredible. Nothing will convince me that you . . ."

As she walked she realised for the first time that the earth really turns on its axis, with an absurd and unnecessary rapidity.

"Readers indeed!" exclaimed Volkoff, turning away, and it was clear that he put an offensive and derogatory meaning into his words. He held his cane under one arm, took a pair of gloves from his pocket, and put them on like a provincial actor playing the part of an injured hero. But to the woman it seemed that the fingers of the gloves opened out as quickly as though filled with compressed air. In the cunning light of the moon, Volkoff's flannel figure looked like a green phantom. Now it had reached the pond, the group of birches, where it disappeared among the silvery trunks of the trees, in the dark sheen of the water. She rubbed her eyes. On such

occasions everyone recurs to this gesture. I know of no author who would have had the courage to omit it. All was still, except for the dogs, who kept up a continual wail. The clock ought, of course, to have struck twelve, and an owl hooted once or twice, but I shan't tell the reader of things that did not happen. I am a ruthless realist, as everyone knows. The stern, brutal truth of my stories is acknowledged by all critics, at least by all who can read. Those who have not yet learnt to do so agree with the others in their estimate of my virtues, as well as of my defects, especially of my defects. Personally, I am convinced that these defects are constantly and reasonably developing and that before long I shall reach the goal of perfection so far as they are concerned. This, however, is related to the future. For the present, my problem is how to end my story. That, I think, is not a difficult matter. For instance:

The woman sighed, looking into the distance. There, behind the round, dusky, glittering orb of the pond, the forest rose like a huge, shaggy eyelash. Not a bad image, at least an unusual one. Ponds, lakes, the seas, always appeared to me as the eyes of the earth, and in my youth, which has receded into a fairy-like distance of time, accessible only to memory, I wrote a poem:

“ You look around, land of my heart,  
With the blue eyes of the oceans  
At your sisters, the golden stars,  
The golden stars in the blue sky.  
Oh, the yearning in the eyes of the oceans  
As they shine in the sky on a blue night.”

And so on and on and on. . . . Very blue verses they were. By the way—that's for the critics. The comparison with land and star, I borrowed from Victor Hugo. But let us continue:

Over the black heap of the forest, three stars swam slowly into the sky, and the woman recognised them as the Wise Men of Orion. The sky was otherwise empty of stars. The stolen light of the moon proudly eclipsed the honest sparkle of the stars. A certain allegory would be appropriate here, most useful for some, offensive for others, but I will omit it, as it would lead me away from the point and the story has to be finished.

Slowly closing the porch door, the woman retired into a small and obviously cosy room, a warm nest where she was wont to hatch the chickens of her phantasy. Rubbing her cold cheeks with the palms of her hands, she stood before the mirror. Her eyes looked at her like the eyes of a stranger, round with fear and bewilderment. They could not believe that this graceful little woman which they so successfully adorned . . .

"He can hardly be a man," she mused. "If he were . . . Why, now I come to think of it, he has almost insulted me!"

She sat down by a table, smoothed a stocking on her shapely leg, and remained there for a long while, playing with her nail scissors. Then she began to polish her nails. It is always easy to think when you are polishing your nails. It seems a pity that Kant knew nothing of this. Thoughts crowded into her head, fluttering anxiously, like specks of dust in a ray of sunlight. But she disliked them all, and this irritated her. She had to make a great effort to direct her thoughts upon Fomine.

Then suddenly she realised that though he was neither handsome nor graceful, he was none the less the most interesting of all her friends. Then, with no less amazement, she discovered that for a long time she had been thinking of him, that all that had taken place only a few minutes ago was only a game she had played, psychically, with a man who was so much more amusing than all the others. Opening her writing pad, she hastily wrote this letter to Fomine:

"Dear Antip Titich! A quarter of an hour ago I lived through a marvellous, incredible, mad experience. If you have any stronger adjectives, use them, but they will not express with sufficient depth and precision what I have been through. Do you know who came to visit me? Paul Volkoff, the hero of your novel, the man you spoke of so much and so well. I could not then, as you will remember, form any clear picture of him. You must not think I have seen a real man who looked like him; no, it was Paul himself, created by you; and, forgive me, he bore very little resemblance to any human being. He said he was the incarnation of your creative power, existing in a shape I could not understand: externally, he resembles a man, but as for his soul—well, he is heartless. He seems unfinished. He is unable to succumb even to the sexual

emotions of a normal man. He is quite well dressed, but awkward—immature, in a way. He complained that, having created him, you proceeded to forget about him. Resenting this, he declared that he would now live independently, on the force with which you have insufficiently endowed him. This is how I understand your hero.

“Please don’t think me insane, or that I am the victim of hallucination. Nothing of the sort: the fact that I treated this strange visit with perfect presence of mind, reasonably and critically, should serve as proof of my mental equilibrium. Your hero, in a word, definitely does not appeal to me: I am certain that with such a man as a leading character in your story, the novel could not be a success. Can there be anything interesting in the life of an uninteresting person? He is not even particularly clever, that Volkoff of yours. You haven’t made a good job of him, and you must re-write him. Anyway, you must do something to prevent his roaming about the world like a ghost. It would surely hurt your reputation. Today he comes to me, tomorrow he may go to another woman. He is looking for a woman the way Diogenes looked for a man.”

She stopped writing, doubtful whether she was attaching too great importance to the matter, and was not her letter a trifle ridiculous? “No,” she decided, “I shall let it stand as it is: it is more amusing that way.” She wrote for a long while, consumed by a desire to annihilate Volkoff completely. What use was he, anyway? What use were all the unpleasant, half-realised characters of fiction? Finally, bringing her mis-sive to a close with many affectionate phrases, she called the maid, ordered her to fasten the shutters securely, and lock the door leading to the porch, adding:

“Glasha, you will lie down on the couch in the next room. I don’t feel very well, and may perhaps have to call you in the night.”

She then undressed, lay down and, trying to picture to herself in what frame of mind Fomine would receive her letter, fell asleep.

His answer arrived in a few days:

“I read your charming and very witty letter on this dull rainy night. It is cold in my room as it is cold in my heart. I have just been at a party, and came home on foot. The rain

beat down incessantly on my umbrella. I was thinking of you and composed some verses. They are not, of course, especially good, but, believe me, they are sincere:

A vision strange I see ahead,  
Alone this earthly path I tread,  
A leaden shadow my misery,  
Dragging behind me drearily.  
My grief to no one I'll impart,  
I'll keep it hidden in my heart,  
Torn with never-ending strife,  
Confused with the secret sense of life.  
For men can give me no relief  
And give them none can I,  
And they will not think ill of me,  
For telling them no lie,  
For being loth with them to share  
Their consolation or my despair.  
Only with you, only with you,  
I mention it and smile."

She smiled. Fomine had forgotten that he had already recited these same verses to her last spring when they were on the river in a boat together. Perhaps it was just as well he had forgotten: she had been irritable that evening and told him that such poetry could be turned out by the mile.

The rest of Fomine's letter read as follows:

"And on my return, I find your letter, so unusual, so full of friendliness, which I sorely needed, and showing a serious interest in my work. Thank you. You have revived that pitiful novel in my memory and definitely killed my hero. I took the manuscript, read it through, blushed for shame, and tore it into small bits. Paul Volkoff will not come to disturb you again."

Apart from that, he wrote everything that a man writes to a woman he is anxious to conquer. On such occasions flattery is inevitable, but it sometimes happens that it is sincere.

She became pensive, and looked out of the window into the park, where blazed a dreary autumnal sun. The wind howled, yellow leaves fell to the ground.

This is really the end of the story.

How the woman behaved later I cannot say, but I think she wrote to her husband: "Forgive me, Paul, but I cannot live with you any longer." I also know nothing of her husband. It is possible that he is one of those rare beings whom women do not leave for another man. It seems to me that men of that type must be deaf, dumb, lame and altogether hideous, or else so completely unhappy and pitiful that their unhappiness cannot be increased.

This story ought to end with a lyrical description of a landscape, but I will not write it. It is quite good enough as it stands.

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# AN ENIGMA





## *An Enigma*

THE doctor, a red-haired man with a long nose, had just finished probing Egor Bikoff's body with his icy fingers, and had declared with an air of finality that the disease, already far advanced, was now definitely alarming. The patient experienced the same sense of humiliation as years before, when he was a young recruit, or later during the Turkish War, when he had lain all night in a clump of prickly shrubs at Eni-Sagra with a broken leg, soaked through by a bleak rain, while pain leisurely tore the flesh from his bones.

"Well, does that mean I'm going to die? Eh?"

The doctor was seated at the table preparing to write, playing with a rusty pen and muttering unintelligible words. Bikoff, greatly upset, paid no attention to him, but looked out of the window where a sharp wind was chasing feathers, filings and dust along the street.

"You've been a hard drinker."

"*That* isn't a good reason," Bikoff argued, mentally cursing the doctor. "Everybody drinks, but that doesn't mean they all die before their time."

Logic prompted angrily:

"There goes a hen. She'll live, lay eggs, hatch chickens. But *you* will die and all your hard work will be wasted . . ."

He saw the doctor out in silence, then looked at himself in the mirror. He was in his underclothes, over which he had thrown a grey dressing-gown. His bare feet were thrust into slippers. He could see in the mirror every line on his long bony face which was gloomily lit up by a pair of greenish eyes, the straight hair of his long beard falling on his chest from the cheeks and the chin. Not a prepossessing picture.

He sighed and, moaning softly, threw himself into a leather armchair near the window, snuffing, acutely aware of the illness stirring in his right side, boring away at his liver and

filling his body with a fuddled sense of weakness and bitterness.

"Drinking, eh? And where do *you* find consolation, you fool?" he grumbled, watching the doctor get into his cab.

"Do you want the samovar?"

Agafia, the cook, a fat and stupid woman, stood at the door.

"How often have I told you, you red-faced dolt, not to put the armchair by the window, right in the sun? Don't you see how the colour's faded? D'you think that's what the sun shines for—to damage furniture?"

"But you put it there yourself," Agafia retorted calmly, and Bikoff remembered what pain it had cost him to move the heavy chair. This, together with the woman's meekness, only irritated him more.

"Oh, go to the devil!"

Agafia disappeared. Bikoff followed her with his eyes, reflecting:

"And this creature will live another forty years, while I have to die! What about my property? I never had time to get married. Too much work to do. I ought to have married right after the war. I'd have had a family by now. Too cautious, that's the trouble. Also, too late to try a cure now. How was I to know that my life was going to be cut short this way?"

He bowed his head, complaining aloud:

"Good God above, why?"

Most vexatious and stupid of all, there was no one to leave his property to: the fruit of twenty years' labour and crafty manipulations. Give it all to a monastery or some other religious institution? His reason could not agree to that. He knew only too well that priests and monks and suchlike who managed God's earthly possessions were not to be trusted—they were sinners like himself. As to God . . . well, he was not too sure about Him. His attitude towards God was suspicious, cautious: he was well aware that God knew all his thoughts and deeds. God alone could keep an eye on him and nobody else could interfere with him, restrain the natural human covetousness so necessary to life. It often happened that all was set and ready for a deal when suddenly something flared up in his soul, awakened dark, unwelcome thoughts,

roused the fear of punishment and sin, sometimes even a feeling akin to compassion for the people whom he had succeeded in duping and crushing. He knew well enough that such things were not mere jokes played by the devil, but the game of God, compelling him to capitulate against his better judgment. He used to say with a kind of mocking resentment to his neighbour and confidant, Kikin, the hunchback, a meek man with eyes like a bird:

"Why should it be my duty to spare others? I was not spared. I haven't been served with too much kindness."

"Of course, it's nonsense," Kikin would reply.

At the thought of Kikin, Bikoff picked up a broomstick and knocked on the ceiling. A few minutes later, the door opened without a sound and the little hunchback walked in. His crooked legs seemed tangled up together as he made his way across the room like a corkscrew.

"Well, what did he say?" asked Kikin, timidly blinking with his eyes so like those of a sick hen.

"It looks as if I've got to die."

Kikin passed his hand over his yellow, hairless face:

"He may be mistaken."

"No, I feel it myself."

"But you're not old?"

"No, that's the snag. But never mind—if one's got to die, one can't get out of it. I'm a soldier, after all. But what about my property?"

Kikin made a shuffling noise on the floor with his feet as he poured out tea, and said with a sigh:

"According to the law, your property should go to your nephew, Jakov Somoff."

"But he's only a distant relative!" Bikoff growled indignantly. His anger intensified the sharp pain in his side. "I don't know what he's like. I haven't laid eyes on him more than five times in my life."

"Yes, but that's the law . . ."

"The law—nonsense!" Bikoff ground his teeth and swore.

"Well, if you feel that way, leave it to charity," advised Kikin reluctantly.

"No, no, not that. I'll not sow my seed on stony ground."

"Not much fun in that, it's true."

After some angry discussion and reflection, Bikoff authorised the hunchback to ask his nephew to come and see him the next day.

"I'll see what sort of an animal he is."

Jakov Somoff arrived the following evening. As he entered the room, he bowed respectfully, without offering his hand, and said:

"How do you do?"

His voice, though not loud, was high-pitched and resonant. The words sounded significant—it was clear that they were not just perfunctory, but filled with good will. He was slightly built, of medium height. His light blue eyes shone softly and calmly out of his weather-beaten face. A lock of flaxen hair stuck out obstinately above the left ear, and a light moustache curled beneath a large nose. There was something strong, clean, attractive about him that struck Bikoff immediately. But he was used to treating strangers with suspicion and thought to himself: "A stupid face. Very probably runs after girls." He then glanced at the young man's clothes: he was poorly dressed in a blue shirt, sail-cloth coat and trousers to match, the lower extremities of which were thrust into high boots. Grunting with pain, and in a matter-of-fact tone, Bikoff questioned his nephew as to what he was, what he did? It turned out that Jakov was nineteen, employed as a clerk in the office of a lumber company. He also sang in the church choir, and liked fishing and reading. Listening to his uneventful story, Bikoff reflected with a certain hostility: "He speaks as if he were at confession. Lying, probably. He suspects why I've asked him here and pretends to be a model young man." Suddenly, too soon and against his better judgment, he said, scowling:

"As to me, I am dying!"

"Why do that?" he heard in reply.

"What do you mean, why? I'm ill," Bikoff retorted in angry astonishment, and added to himself, "The boy's an idiot."

Jakov spoke with an unfamiliar tender persuasiveness:

"There are cures for all diseases. Carrot juice, for instance. A year ago I was threatened with consumption. The

choir-master's mother, a kind and knowing old lady, advised me to drink a glass of carrot juice the moment I got up in the morning. I was cured—completely."

Smiling good-humouredly, he stroked his neck and chest, and Bikoff felt as though he were being soothed by these calm words. The gnawing pain ceased.

"Well, that may be all right for consumption, but my disease is different."

"But consumption is a disease, too. Really, you must try carrot juice, or horse-radish mixed with alcohol. Horse-radish is even better. It contains saltpetre and that's the best antidote against every form of decomposition or decay. You put it in brine when you pickle fish to keep them from spoiling. All disease is simply a matter of decay."

Jakov *did* speak pleasantly, his words rolled lightly one after the other like grains of sand, and Bikoff's contempt for his nephew's youth was forgotten.

"How do you know all this?" he asked.

And the young man, speaking as to an old friend, told him of his acquaintance with a wonderful fisherman, a highly educated fellow, who had committed suicide the autumn before.

"Why did he kill himself?"

"Because of an unhappy love affair."

"Foolish to commit suicide though."

"His emotions were straightforward."

"Eh?"

"He was a single-minded man."

"Hm!" And to himself, he mused: "An odd youngster. Talkative, but that's his youth, of course."

Some time passed in this easy conversation, then Somoff, glancing at the lazy fingers of the clock on the wall, said it was high time he was going: choir rehearsal. He took leave in a most respectful manner, and went out.

Bikoff lay back on the couch and reflected. Long conversations generally tired him. What was there, after all, worth talking about? It was so easy to see what a man wanted of one the moment he began, and one always knew what one wanted of him. But this boy was different. He was modest, he had not even referred to their relationship, never called

him uncle, though he must have known he was Bikoff's only living relative. But possibly this shy manner was, after all, only acting. No, it didn't look like that.

Tired and perspiring, Kikin returned home from the shops where he had been storing hemp, and seated himself by the table.

"Has he been here?"

"Yes."

"Well, what do you think of him?"

"Can't tell yet. But there's no saying, he seems friendly and well disposed."

Pouring out tea for himself, Kikin greedily munched a piece of bread and sausage, listening attentively to his host.

"He seems to like offering consolation. But that kind is naturally deceitful. I don't trust them. Friendliness is another thing that doesn't appeal to me. People are accustomed to live as though God made them to mock at each other."

"That's right," agreed the hunchback, who had been mercilessly mocked all his life for his deformity.

"Yes, indeed, and the devil sets us against each other like fighting cocks. Man sins and the devil grins. As for God's purpose in all this, no one knows what it is. He's like the police inspector at the theatre—watches and keeps still."

Bikoff went on and on in an injured tone, and finally closed his eyes from sheer exhaustion.

"Have you heard anything about Jakov?" he asked.

Kikin, who was spreading honey over his bread, turned with his chair towards his friend and answered:

"Titoff, his boss, says he's an industrious lad, but occasionally rather imaginative."

"What's that mean?"

"Titoff could not explain, but I took it to mean that the boy sometimes went to extremes or did things for no particular reason. I enquired of the deacon—he has only praise for Jakov. But you can't trust him, he's a friend. They go fishing together. His landlady says he drinks only in company, but the company he keeps is odd: workmen from Kononoff's, locksmiths, the barber . . ."

"Well, what do you expect? That he should keep company with the Governor?"

"He never brings women to the house, he leaves his room and his things tidy. She says he's considerate . . ."

"Considerate?"

"Yes."

"That's because he's young. Well, he knows, no doubt, that you have been investigating, and also why I asked him to come here?"

"I doubt it. I've been very careful, you know."

Bikoff remained silent, thinking.

"Well," he said in conclusion, "it seems the only thing to do. I suppose it must be so. See if you can't find out a little more about him, will you? And then tell him to come to see me again. I think I forgot to invite him."

With gloomy irritation, he exclaimed:

"Just think what this means to me! I have worked and worked, sinned against my immortal soul, and all—what for? For some fool of a stranger! A nincompoop!"

"Yes, it's like a bad anecdote," agreed the meek little hunchback, blinking his huge round eyes.

The disease seemed to have waited only for the doctor's final decision. Shortly after his visit, it progressed with alarming rapidity. The pain in Bikoff's side became intolerable, his head swam, it seemed to him that in every part of his body little worms of resentment and yearning stirred uninteruptedly.

"How goes it today?" asked Kikin.

Bikoff groaned angrily: "It's hard to die—it's the first time it's happening to me. I'm not used to it."

He loved to joke, and was an artist at it. It was a great help to him, particularly when he was reproached and abused by people whom he had treated badly.

"It's God's will, not my sin, that I should have your skin," he used to say to them.

But of late his sense of humour had deserted him and only from force of habit could he still laugh at Kikin, who was by now impervious to mockery. For whole days on end he lay on his couch, his face to the wall under the ikons, feeling every moment the energy of his brain ebbing away, his head



empty as a bell, with one thought ringing and rolling in it: "I'm going to die. Why?"

Sometimes, in order to stifle that question, he tried to recall the almost forgotten words of a prayer: "God Almighty, save me from hell and every other abomination and from the Evil Spirit, by day and night . . ."

But he felt that these words could not reconcile him to the will of God, which was this inevitable premature death, and served only to intensify the depth of his grief and resentment.

Then he would rise and, throwing a grey cloth dressing-gown about his shoulders, walk to the blue fathomless hole that was his window. As he passed the mirror, it cast back at him the reflection of his gaunt figure like that of a convict, a dark face with eyes now grown dim and a dishevelled beard. Taking a comb from the table under the mirror he would return to his armchair and sit there combing his hair and beard, gazing out at the street and the houses which were separated one from the other by luxuriant gardens. Strong, steady houses, they seemed, destined to stand for centuries.

The street was quiet, deserted and hot. Everyone was in the country; only porters remained, loafing about in the porches. But in the gardens he could hear the soft fussy chirruping of birds which did not interfere with his thoughts on the injustice of God's ways. Those houses, for instance, built on deep foundations, those human nests of brick and mortar, would stand there for ever, while man, who made them, must die. Man had adorned the world by the labour of his hands, yet man was condemned to perish. Why? The recipient of the Cross of St. George, Egor Ivanovich Bikoff, merchant, must die an early death, not having lived until fifty. For what crime? Was he a greater sinner than the others? And was death a punishment for one's sins?

On the evenings of Jakov Somoff's visits, the dying man felt better. His nephew's conversation, arousing his curiosity, diverted his mind from dark thoughts. He wanted to try to understand him, though he was consumed with envy of him. This lad would live a long time, in comfort and peace and happiness at the expense of another man's efforts. He would be able to live free from sin. It was unjust: it was an absurd mockery!

The conversations were interesting. Bikoff was amazed at the novel turns they would take, but the boy, in his opinion, curiously combined intelligence with stupidity. And this prevented his forming a definite opinion of Jakov. This he was most anxious to do as soon as possible.

"I wonder if he's naturally stupid, or is it because he is young?" he asked himself, as he listened to Jakov.

"To live as others do," he heard his nephew say, with a thoughtful smile, "is dull. To live as others do not, is difficult."

"True," Bikoff agreed. "But people are different, aren't they?"

It was vexing to hear this nice-looking boy reply without a protest, yet with a certain obstinacy.

"In one main thing they are all alike when you watch them carefully."

"And what is the main thing?"

"Relying on the energy of others."

Bikoff said nothing. He stroked his beard and watched Jakov attentively. His nephew was quite right. But surely he himself was going to live on the energy of another—Bikoff's energy? Did he realise that? If so, he was speaking against his own interests, and in that case he was silly. And if he did not realise it, well, he was also silly. Trying once again to discover the essential in Jakov, he said:

"Life, my boy, is war. Its law is simple: Look sharp!"

"Quite right. That's the root of all the trouble."

"But you can't eliminate the trouble."

Jakov smiled and was silent. Bikoff thought that the youth's smiles always appeared on his girlish face at the wrong moment—they were unwarranted and unnecessary. There was even something offensively condescending about them.

"He thinks he's wise," thought Bikoff, half closing his eyes.

It was equally unpleasant when, in the middle of a discussion, Jakov would suddenly stop talking, his eyes lowered as if he knew something fundamentally important but would not divulge it, preferring to play with his teaspoon or a button on his coat. Such silences angered the elder man, and one day he shrieked at his nephew:

"Don't you understand what I'm telling you?"

Politely, almost guiltily, Jakov answered:

"I quite understand, but I don't agree with what you say."

"Why not?"

"Because my ideas are different."

"Well, what are your ideas? Tell me! Speak! Argue! Why do you sit still and say nothing?"

"I don't like arguing," replied Jakov, always polite. "I don't know how to argue. I think discussion only shows how greatly men disagree among themselves."

"So you think men ought never to talk, is that it?"

The boy ignored this, and went on:

"Men discuss not in order to find the truth but to conceal it. The great, simple truths are already established: be like children, love your neighbour as yourself. It is not right to argue against truths like that."

"He's a half-wit!" thought Bikoff with vexation. He laughed angrily and the laughter increased his pain. "So you think you can live like a child, do you, and love your neighbour as yourself? But only a moment ago you agreed that life was war, and yet . . . See here, boy, that won't do."

But Jakov went on, with quiet obstinacy, in no wise disconcerted by his uncle's sarcasm.

"All the same, there is no other way to do away with life's miseries, and we ought to direct all our thoughts to that end."

"To what end?"

"To live simply—like children."

"But, you foolish boy, children are the naughtiest little pests on earth. Don't you realise that? Have you never seen them fighting—like little animals!"

Again Jakov smiled and was silent. Bikoff wanted to be abusive, but checked himself and, grunting because of the sharp pain in his side, said sullenly:

"Well, never mind then. You may go now. I'm tired out."

He sat down by the window, watching the flame-coloured clouds glowing above the tree-tops. He began to think again:

"What a queer lad! He's got jelly in his head instead of brains. He's muddled in his mind. You can't get hold of him. He won't give you a chance. Good Lord! Problems and puzzles everywhere! The boy eats slowly—a bad sign; only sluggards eat slowly. And not much: only small bites; the

way high-born gentlemen eat. Chews for a long while, like an old man, although his teeth are strong and healthy. And he's thoughtful—as if he had anything to think about at his age! He walks slowly, too: again as if he were thinking, walking in a strange land. Looks somewhat like a girl. If it weren't for that shock of hair, you would take him for a woman . . .

"To live like children! The fool! Try and do it once and see what comes of it! But maybe, after all, he's only a soft-hearted youngster who wasn't flogged often enough when he was a child. His heart isn't hardened. He's young, and still hopes to go through life without hurting people, without being hurt himself, without sin. A fine idea — but scarcely practicable!"

He recalled his own hard life, and began to feel very sorry for himself; there was even a little pity left over for Jakov.

"He must know," thought Bikoff, "that it's hard to live differently from other men, that to live without sin is like living without butter, the porridge dry, the work slow. A man enjoys a soft bed. Still . . . Jakov's a nice boy. . . . He must have a few drops of the Bikoff blood in his veins . . ."

The moment Kikin arrived, Bikoff began scoffing:

"Well, my friend, my heir presumptive is not very bright. Rather stupid, as a matter of fact. Says we all ought to live like children. Did you ever hear that before?"

"It says so in the Bible," the hunchback ventured timidly.

"What's in the Bible?"

"That . . . what you said. Christ . . ."

Bikoff grunted angrily and, putting his hand to his flaming side, snarled:

"Christ was the Son of God, and I am the son of Ivan Bikoff, a peasant. There's a heap of difference, eh? Christ never bothered about getting hemp; He didn't live among people like us."

With growing irritation, he pounded his clenched fist on the leather arm of his chair:

"If you're going to live as Christ did, then take off your coat and boots and go around like that, in a cassock, barefoot. And cut off your hair, see?"

The excitement had exhausted him. His face contracted, he was silent. A moment later, he turned on Kikin reproachfully:

"You, too, talking about Christ! What's He got in common with a hunchback? Yes. Now—for instance, can you hear them? Birds, of no use to anyone, singing while a man is dying? Christ did not know this kind of thing!"

Kikin cautiously remarked:

"In Gethsemane, Christ also complained of *His* fate."

This seemed to please Bikoff. He recovered his spirits, spoke rapidly:

"Aha! I remember! That's right! An early death was bitter even to Him. And I am only a man . . ."

With a groan of pain, he sank back into his chair, stretched out his feet and began to whimper:

"What are we going to do about it, Kikin? What's to become of all my property? This is quite ridiculous. I've worked hard and sinned to accumulate my fortune. *Was* it only to throw it into a pit in the end?"

He went on and on, piteously, angrily, his arm outstretched, poking at the flower-pots on the window-sill, while Kikin listened with bent head, drumming his fingers on the sharp knee of his crooked leg.

"On the other hand," he said with a sigh, "if you don't leave it either to Jakov or to charity, it reverts to the State."

Bikoff chuckled:

"As though I'd been sentenced to hard labour and had my goods confiscated!"

"Exactly. That's the situation, the enigma . . ."

"Fine situation, what?"

"Yes. It looks hopeless."

They were both silent for a while, thinking of a way out of the difficulty. Kikin at length suggested that Jakov be asked to come to live in Bikoff's home so that the two might become better acquainted, and Jakov be given a chance to learn the proper way to live. Perhaps the boy would become more serious when he realised the obligations put upon men by the possession of property. They both agreed on that.

Torrents of rain lashed against the window-panes, the wind sobbed loudly, the strange, glassy twilight of the street was gashed by sudden forks of lightning. The room was illuminated by blue-grey spurts of light. The potted flowers on the

window-sill looked as if they were tumbling down and everything else in the room slid with a quiver towards the white patch of the door.

There was a blazing fire in the Dutch stove, and Egor Bikoff was seated in front of it, warming his cold feet. Warm, reddish ribbons of light ran up and down the length of his grey dressing-gown, on his knees and chest, now and then touching the beard, but leaving the face in deep shadow. It was a blind face, and the eyes were closed.

Kikin, a huddled mass, sat on a low footstool, his hand hidden under the hump on his chest. His strange eyes, reflecting the light, peered from underneath into Jakov's face, who, leaning against the stove, spoke softly as though reciting a fairy-tale:

"The more property is accumulated, the fiercer the envy of other people. The poor who see the immense fortunes of the rich . . ."

"Hm!" Bikoff slowly opened his eyes, and Kikin, with a sigh, poked at the fire, moving the wood; the coals cracked fiercely and threw off spluttering sparks on to the metal plate below the stove. Bikoff ran one foot over the sparks and frowned.

"How wrong it all is!" he thought. "How unpleasant!"

He looked at Kikin. Kikin's face was like an old leather ball much used, much played with, the stubby hair on his skull looked like grey plush; his toad's mouth was open in amazement; his ears were like those of an animal, like a devil's ears. Jakov, on the other hand, resembled a pretty picture painted on white tiles. He looked smart enough in that new suit of his, but that did not make him more pleasant.

"Does that mean," asked Bikoff sarcastically, "that the poor will decide to rob the rich? Is that your idea?"

"Of course, there should be an equal division of wealth . . ."

"Oh, indeed?" said Bikoff. "That's not right thinking, my boy!"

"Millions of people believe it."

"Have you counted them?"

"The masses are beginning to get angry. That much is true," said Kikin cautiously, staring into the fire. "Everybody is discontented."

Raising his brows to the limit, Bikoff roared:

"You hold your tongue! Don't you see I'm holding mine?"

Though Jakov had not been two months in his uncle's home, Bikoff was now always hearing the cautious echoing of Jakov's words from the hunchback. He treated Jakov obsequiously; the dog was getting the bearings of his new master.

"Oh, humanity! Humanity!"

The nephew, in an odd way, went on being either an unspeakable fool or a crafty fellow. One could not make out what he wanted. He was soft and gentle and beguiling. He wanted people to agree with him that, somehow, the root of all evil in life, all its chaos, was wealth. An ugly, crooked idea. It didn't seem to fit in with Jakov. He could not be sincere. Then why pretend? He knew by now that he would be a rich man when his uncle died, and he certainly didn't look like one who would associate with paupers. He wouldn't give away his riches to the poor. He acted like a man accustomed to rule. He had a due respect for things, he was tidy and clean. The moment he came he got on to the porter, helped him to put the neglected yard in order, went over the property from top to bottom, even caught the clerk stealing. No, he had no liking for beggars. All the same, he was muddle-headed, and one couldn't grasp what was real in him. That shock of hair. Hm! In his brain there was, also, that obstinate shock of hair. Perhaps he brought out all this unusual, dislikable heresy with a purpose—to frighten and irritate the sick man, to drive him into his grave as soon as possible. The idea disturbed Bikoff, and one day he asked the youth point-blank:

"Why do you tell me all this rubbish?"

"So that things should be more clear," was the nephew's answer.

He opened his sheep's eyes wide. His eyes were also dual. Sometimes they were the open eyes of a frank youth and sometimes they went dull and motionless like the eyes of a blind man. They always did that when he expounded his heresies.

"We must be clear. People must be unanimous on this question of mutual aid . . ."

"Aid against what?" enquired Bikoff irritably. "Where does all this hatred come from? It's in the people themselves, don't you see?"

"People cannot live in discord," answered Jakov obstinately. "It is said that we should not sow the wind or we shall reap the tempest. We must rouse the nation's conscience, or else there'll be a people's revolt."

"Lies!" thundered Bikoff angrily.

Day and night he wondered whether Jakov was worthy to be his heir, and his preoccupation with this matter diverted his thoughts from the subject of death. It even seemed at times that his pain was not so acute.

"A mystifying boy," he said to himself. "Why, every pauper knows that a man's strength and defence is wealth, property. Why, even moles know that . . ."

At night, when everything on earth becomes still, as though deliberating on the past day, and man's thoughts grow heavier and almost visible, while the tight clot of reason, slowly unravelling itself, stretches out its dark threads, he lay still, hearkening, realising that upstairs the others, Jakov and Kikin, were not asleep.

He could imagine the youth speaking in his accustomed obstinate way, he could see his eyes and the hunchback's crumpled, astonished face. Jakov was, of course, advocating a change in the laws, trying to limit the authority and power of the Czar. He dares even that, the scamp! Such things were discussed cautiously, in whispers during the Turkish campaign years ago, and cropped up again on the outbreak of another war. But it was only the civilians who talked that way; they did not want to fight, they were afraid of conscription. They had even wanted to kill the Czar then, but were just too late and killed him after the war was over.

What idiocy! Joshua made war, and then there was David. He was meek enough, writing Psalms—and even *he* couldn't avoid fighting. The monks made wars. The Orthodox Princes fought against the Tartars. St. Alexander Nevsky waged merciless battle with the Swedes. And yet these leaders had not been killed by their own people. Bah! What dark ignorance!

When he was tired of lying in bed, Bikoff rose and sat in front of his window and watched the stars and the fat



womanish face of the moon. How dreary the sky was with its tawdry display of stars! The priest, Father Fyodor, used to say that people didn't sufficiently admire the miraculous splendour of the sky, but he cheated at poker, and you couldn't play preference with him at all. Bikoff recalled how he had quarrelled with him, saying there was nothing wonderful about the sky, that it reminded him simply of the pitiful mediocrity of mankind, and that he preferred it in the daytime with the sun showing up its naked emptiness. The night was better when there were clouds that concealed the firmament, and made one forget its existence. Man was created to live on the earth, and when priests sought to entice him away from it, it was as though a bridegroom, just recruited as a soldier, were suddenly snatched from the arms of his bride back to the barracks. The priest was furious . . .

The trees outside were so closely stuck together by the enveloping darkness that they looked as if they had been dipped into a tar barrel. There was no sound in the town: it was so quiet that one had an insane desire to shriek: "Fire!"

"Almighty God!" muttered Bikoff, "why do You punish me this way? Am I a greater sinner than the others?"

What of his friends? Why, they were far worse than he—covetous, envious, crafty. *He* had a conscience, that is why he had no real friends. He had lived his whole life in solitude, slowly preparing a stable, peaceful home where he might live with a kind and beautiful wife. It is pleasant to have a handsome, healthy woman at one's side, to dress her up like a doll, take her out walking or driving on holidays, boast of her finery, of the valuable array on her soft smooth body—the envy of others. How sweet! Half closing his eyes, he scrutinised in the dark the heavy furniture of his room. With what high hopes he had bought every article. Things had a great significance—a man lives among them as in his own fortress. If you take them all out, the room will look like a large coffin.

Why? Oh, God!

It seemed to him that upstairs in Kikin's garret he heard Jakov's voice unfurling his heresies, like on a sewing machine.

"He's stubborn, certainly, and that's not altogether a fault,

only his notions are childish. When I was young, I didn't know what I wanted either."

Bikoff's thoughts gradually acquired a different trend. He had no other heirs except Jakov anyhow. Such was his luck! Having taken this decision, feeling it was against his reason, he found it necessary to justify it to himself, but found nothing but: "The boy is modest and sober. He will become cleverer when he has wealth."

Strangely enough, however, when he thought of Jakov, not as his heir but simply as a stranger, he definitely liked him. With astonishment, he felt that there was a certain amount of wisdom in the boy's obstinate, mad ideas. Maybe not the wisdom that he himself had lived upon, an alien wisdom, but one that came from a heart untroubled by life, from a deep faith in something. Often, as he watched his nephew's intricate and, at times, unintelligible ideas shape themselves into easy words, Bikoff felt what was almost a wave of envy, and frowning to hide a reluctant smile, he thought to himself:

"Yes, clever. He's a bleak, dull bird, but his song is sweet enough. If he were wearing my feathers he wouldn't be quite so gay, though. He has an easy time of it, the young devil!"

What Bikoff enjoyed most were Jakov's stories about his previous employer, Titoff, a drunkard with oddities. At these tales he would roar with laughter, opening his large mouth wide, grunting and closing his eyes with pleasure. It was agreeable to picture his enemy in ridiculous and pathetic situations, and pleasant to see that Jakov's keen and observant eye was well aware of the infirmities and weaknesses of other men.

"You've got a good eye," he would say, "and that is useful. It's always well to see on which leg a man limps. If it's the left, hit him on the right; if the right, give it him on the left!"

Then Jakov would proceed in his clear voice:

"When Titoff feels the fit coming on, he sends for the engineer, Baltiski, and for ten days the two of them drink—but there's a twist to it. This is the twist: they send the servant, Christopher, out into the garden at night and have him bury about twenty bottles of wine here and there in the ground so that not even the tops should be seen. Early next

morning, they go out with canes as if they were hunting for mushrooms. They dig and look for the bottles, and when they find a bottle of vodka, they exclaim gleefully: 'Here's a white mushroom!' That bottle is soon drunk, out in the summerhouse, and then they look for more mushrooms. A red mushroom is claret, champagne is a champignon, brandy a pepper mushroom, liqueur an orange agaric. So it goes, all day long, hunting for mushrooms and drinking the wine in the order in which they find them. Sometimes they begin with liqueurs. By the end of their bout, Titoff is so drunk that he gets down on all fours like Nebuchadnezzar and sings from Rubinstein's opera, 'The Demon':

' I am he whom no one loves  
Cursed by every living thing.

Baltiski, in the meantime, lies on the ground trying in vain to pull another bottle out of the earth with his teeth. He whimpers bitterly, wondering where his strength has gone to."

And Bikoff would laugh long and loud, in spite of the gnawing pain it caused him, and Jakov would add with obvious compassion:

"You are right to laugh; still I pity such men. Powerful men, both of them, who could move mountains, but work with no more than two fingers of their hands. It is quite wrong to say that people are greedy. No, people are not greedy for work as I see them."

"You're young, that's why you don't see much," said Bikoff, only because he wished to contradict.

"I can't make the lad out at all," he thought. "One moment he will discuss matters like a real master—it is true that people *have* no greediness for work—sluggards, all of them. And yet there's something out of the way, absurd, in feeling sorry for his master because the master doesn't work enough. He believes in honest labour, but if things were organised in such a way that everyone worked honestly, devoting all their energies to it, all these childish ideas of his would be out of place."

"You're muddle-headed, Jakov," said Bikoff sullenly. "There's something you have taken too lightly and not thought through to the end . . ."

Jakov was silent and lowered his eyes, trying to smooth down the shock of hair, but making it stick out all the more.

Suddenly a spirit of unrest seemed to overcome the merchants. They chased their horses to and fro, driving pompously in their carriages. From his window Bikoff watched the anxious scurrying of people in the street, of people not used to scurry.

"What are they so excited about?" he enquired of the hunchback. He noticed that Kikin's gloomy face had changed, brightened, his hen's eyes lost their unhealthy dimness. The little man, who had always suffered ridicule from others, now seemed to walk more erect, his crooked feet were steadier. It seemed now that, when he moved, a spring was hidden in his hunch. Blinking excitedly, gesticulating, and pulling up his creased trousers, he began to unroll a most extraordinary tale:

"Really," he said, "it's a remarkable scandal. Everybody in town's mixed up in it—the Board of Trade, the merchants, the nobles, even the priests. A peculiar enigma, Egor Ivanovich . . ."

"Wait a moment: the Governor's in town?"

"Of course he is."

"The Czar is still alive?"

"Quite so."

"Well then?"

The hunchback smiled a grim and unfamiliar smile:

"What do you want to know?"

"You fool!"

Jakov would doubtless have given a better account of the events, but he had asked leave to go to Moscow. He had been visiting the city, as a matter of fact, for the past two weeks.

The excitement in the town was now growing, the hustle and drone increasing, like at Eastertide or when a fire broke out.

"What's it all about?" asked Bikoff, gruffly.

"You see, the people are demanding . . ."

"Stop your babbling! What people? The peasants?"

"The peasants, too . . ."

"What does 'too' mean?"

"They are asking for land."

"Asking whom?"

"Well, you see . . ." began the hunchback, and went on talking utter nonsense, wriggling in his chair like a lobster in a frying-pan, smiling guiltily and murmuring: ". . . People are . . . they're demanding an account of things from each other."

He rubbed his hands, a heady joy shone in his eyes contradicting the disturbing tale; the crooked legs shuffled and stamped under the table irritatingly.

"The voice of all the injured has been raised, minds have sobered up, and all agree that the old existence cannot go on . . ."

"Old existence? What do you mean, you two-humped devil?"

"This existence. They're all talking very boldly, some of them as if they had been asleep and the past were only a dream. I swear they do! Purpose and determination . . ."

Turning his hairless old face to Bikoff, he sat down sideways beside him; his rusty-coloured coat rose upon his sharp hump, revealing the white shirt and the braces that held up his trousers, sprinkled with mud to the knee.

Bikoff thought with scorn what a wretched little beggar this was living under his roof.

"This is a real enigma, Egor Ivanovich. Everybody's out in the street, crowding round the town hall."

"Go to hell!"

Remaining alone, Bikoff thought drearily:

"A worthless worm! But what he says makes me anxious. I'll give him some money and send him away. Now that Jakov's here I don't need him any longer."

Toward evening on a rainy day, Jakov returned from Moscow. He was very solemn as he came in for tea, and behaved as if he had just returned from church, from communion. There was something tense in him. The shock of hair stuck out more challenging than usual, his eyebrows were drawn over his eyes in preoccupation. His voice was deeper and hoarser. He sat down by the table, pushing his chair with his foot, not quite so timid as before. Bikoff felt even more disturbed. He had a premonition of some calamity.

"Well, how is Moscow?" he enquired.

Jakov replied thoughtfully, in an exceptionally loud voice, separating his words unpleasantly, like a witness in the stand under oath to speak nothing but the truth. He spoke a long time and avoided answering his uncle's angry questions, stopping frequently, trying to remember words or making them up on the spur of the moment.

"He's lying," thought Bikoff, "and he's trying to frighten me." He was offended by Jakov's disregard for his questions and kept his angry eye on Kikin, who sat impatiently squirming in his chair, opening his frog's mouth, evidently only waiting to put in a word.

"They're plotting against me," thought Bikoff.

Jakov was relating the most extraordinary things: all classes, it seemed, had suddenly risen up to demand an improvement in living conditions, each according to their interests, and were now fighting each other like drunken men.

"Well, and what will come of it all?" asked Bikoff, suspiciously and angrily.

Jakov reflected for a moment, sighed and said:

"There will be trouble unless we have a general re-awakening of conscience and an attempt at mutual aid. I am sorry to have to tell you something that may upset you, but I can't conceal from you that it looks as though a real armed revolution were on the way."

"You're lying!" yelled Bikoff with firm determination. "Armed? Where would the arms come from? You liar! You're taking advantage of my illness, my inability to go out and see for myself, trying to frighten me, to kill me . . ."

He pounded his fist on the table, rattling the teacups. His eyes started from his head, he groaned:

"I don't believe in the end of the world. I'm not an old woman. I'm not afraid. I'm afraid of nothing. So long as I'm alive, I'm master of my own property, you hear!"

He stopped suddenly, seeing Jakov with a flush on his face, moving towards him with his chair. He coughed hoarsely.

"Well," said the nephew, as though driving in nails, "in that case, let's have it out. You suspect me of having designs on your money. Konstantin Dmitrivich here told me that, too. You are quite mistaken, however. Such an idea is an insult

to me. I don't need your money. I refuse to accept it. If you like, I'll put that in writing. Today. The reason why I came here to live with you was because you're lonely and sick and bored. I knew you were better than many other men—you are at least outspoken and have other qualities, too. For instance, you might quite legitimately have ruined Becker, the school-teacher, and turned him into a beggar, also the two Kasimirsky girls, but you didn't. This is why I respected you and why I came here. But from now on I can't stay. Good-bye!"

His voice was hoarse, he ended almost in a whisper, coughed, rose from his chair and went to the door, adding:

"Of course, I am very grateful to you. I very much regret . . ."

"Wait!" shouted Bikoff, drawing the belt of his dressing-gown tightly about him and for some reason raising the ends high above his shoulders. "Wait! Don't lose your temper!"

But Jakov had already gone. Bikoff stood up, still clutching the end of his belt like reins, and shouted at the hunchback:

"Run! Bring him back!"

Kikin jumped up, whirled round and disappeared through the door.

"Well, I never!" Bikoff muttered, watching the door with surprise. "What do you think of that!" And he listened eagerly for sounds on the stairs. It was not Jakov's refusal of his money that had taken his breath away, but that he had known about Becker, a stupid fellow who had got into the hands of moneylenders, and the beautiful Kasimirsky girls almost ruined by a rake of a father. "I respected you," he said. "Hm! I 'insulted' him! A child, a mere child, that's what he is . . ."

"You're screwy," Bikoff said, smiling shamefacedly as Jakov returned. "Why fly into a rage that way? Come here. Sit down. My property belongs to you, not only because I'm willing it to you; it's yours according to the law."

Jakov refused to sit. He stood holding the back of the chair.

"I do not wish to speak about the will," he said softly, but firmly.

"Is that so? Positively refuse, do you?"

"Yes. Besides, all inheritances may soon be abolished by law."

"What?" Bikoff asked, brandishing his belt. He felt uneasy—like a hungry beggar who had suddenly received something good to eat. "Sit down. Don't be angry with a sick man. You can't be deprived of your inheritance. That's the law."

"The law ought to be changed," said Jakov, sitting down at last. "All our miseries come from it."

"Very well, then, let us change the law," agreed Bikoff jokingly, his eyes glued on his nephew. It seemed to him that Jakov looked ill: his girlish face seemed thinner than usual, his lips bluer. He often passed his tongue over them. His eyes had dark circles round them; they were sullen and dim.

"Have you got a temperature?"

"No," said Jakov, smoothing down his lock. "Don't joke about all this; there is a real movement among the people against the rich, and they talk of seizing all the wealth . . ."

"Don't you worry," Bikoff reassured him firmly. "Don't you worry, they'll seize nothing."

"I'm not worrying, I'm all in favour . . ."

Bikoff inhaled as much air as he could in a deep snore and noisily let it out, together with the pain. He then began to speak in strong, well-enunciated words, like the priest Feodor when he was preaching:

"A man without wealth is like a dried-up bone, the wealth being his flesh, his meat. Do you understand? The meat!"

He tapped his hand on the leather of the armchair and repeated:

"The meat. And a man lives in order to grow this meat for the full consummation of his desires. He who wants little, costs less . . ."

"Well, so everyone has decided to want more," Jakov put in with a laugh.

"What's that? What is it they want? Don't you trust words so much—trust the work. It's not enough to want, one must work for it. When there'll be lots of everything, enough for everyone, everybody'll be happy."

And, as gently as he could, Bikoff said to his nephew:



"I'm not stupid. I understand you want to have it all in the Christian way, very simple, very pure. It's true that Christ wanted to have everything distributed in equal shares, but then He lived in a poor world, while we live in a rich one. In Christ's time there were fewer people and they wanted less and even then there was not enough to go round for everyone. Now we're more greedy, we're more numerous, and each wants to have the lot. That means: work, hoard, accumulate . . ."

Bikoff was himself astonished by his thoughts; they had burst forth suddenly, independent of his will, had come to him like a stranger—unknown and interesting. This confused him rather, but one thought appeared to him true, correct, an easy solution to the sinful riddle of life and, listening to it himself, he repeated:

"First you must work, and pile it all up—then go, distribute it equally, even to useless cripples. Let them have it, too! So that there should be no poverty and no filth and not a shadow of sin. Yes. Everybody having their fill, everybody living their own way, no one to look at you with anger or envy. Everyone a saint in himself. Yes, that's it—everyone a saint . . ."

He went on speaking and was amazed to see that this trend of thought could be developed without end, prompting easily the necessary words. It even seemed to him that the tight roll of this thought had lain for a long time at the bottom of his soul and had today come alive and stirred, releasing a strong unending thread. This unrolling of the ball made him breathless, as though he were racing along a smooth, slippery road in winter. The new words came so easily, as though he'd always used them. It was pleasant to know himself to be clever in a new way, to see the hunchback listen with a fuddled smile, and Jakov, leaning forward in his chair, looking at him with his girlish eyes, like a son. All this was so touching, so pregnant with the sense of power which links people together, that tears of joy stood out in Bikoff's eyes. He suddenly sank back into his chair exhausted, and muttered, closing his eyes:

"Who wants to be the people's enemy? Want is a menace, the need for work is great. And there should be no delaying, for death awaits everyone."

Kikin, jumping up anxiously, said:

"Egor Ivanovich, do lie down. You're tired. Yasha, help to get him to bed."

They took him under the arms and led him to his bed, gently tucked him in and went away silently, the hunchback, getting entangled in his feet, walking in front and Jakov, smoothing down his lock of hair, following him with bent head.

For some days Bikoff lived in a state of elation, filled with unusual, solemn excitement, wrapped up in the warm solicitude of Kikin and Jakov. He was growing steadily weaker. A nurse had to be called in. She was tall and thin as a rod, a woman of few words. Her face was pock-marked and her eyes colourless. Humbly observing the ebbing of his strength, Bikoff, through the maze of his illness, noted the preoccupied expression on Kikin's averted face, the anxious look in his eyes. Jakov, too, became more silent, pale and sullen. He disappeared several times a day and, returning, talked cautiously and reluctantly of the events in the town.

"They're trying to spare me," thought Bikoff. "Both of them. Don't want to disturb me. I suppose I'm pretty near the end."

However, the idea of death frightened him even less than it had before—the offensive aspect of it was blunted, had become less bitter, though he thought how pleasant it would have been to live a bit longer now, with Jakov, and Kikin was a good fellow, after all.

"They understand me at last. I've opened up my soul to them."

With a wry smile he thought of his nephew:

"I think I've explained to him the real meaning of property. He's beginning to worry about it. To think that he wanted it to be divided up among the poor. What strange beings men are!"

Turning to the nurse, he asked:

"What's happening in town, eh?"

He wanted to get at the truth of what Kikin related so confusedly and Jakov so cautiously.

"They are still rioting," said the sister indifferently, as though rioting was the usual pastime of the townspeople, like

boozing and trading. She often yawned, covering up her mouth with the palm of her hand and making the sign of the cross. Sleepiness seemed to reside in her faded eyes, she walked with a noiseless, cat-like tread.

The shooting in the town began on a Saturday and continued far into the grey, wet dawn of Sunday. The first shots were heard in the far distance, muffled by the soft rain that penetrated the air like dust. Bikoff listened to the cracks that sounded like a crow pecking with its sharp beak on a wet iron roof.

"What's the knocking?" he asked, waking up the nurse.

She listened, lifting her head like a snake, her eyes turned to the grey squares of the windows.

"I don't know. Do you want your medicine?"

"Hush!"

The sharp cracking was now more frequent, came closer. It sounded like the ticking of a counting board under the deft fingers of a skilled accountant.

"It sounds like firing," Bikoff muttered gloomily, knowing with the ear of an old soldier that it was, indeed, firing. "Go upstairs and wake the others."

The nurse rose, tucked her hair up under her kerchief and disappeared, swaying in the dusk as in a high wind. Bikoff sat on the edge of the bed, smoothing his hair and beard with trembling hands, and listened.

"They're shooting, the dirty dogs! Who is shooting at whom?"

The nurse came running down the stairs and shrieked at the door in that silly, thin voice of hers:

"They're shooting at your roof!"

"You fool!" answered Bikoff sternly. "They're only blanks!"

"No, no! Merciful God, no!"

"Be quiet! It's manœuvres—practice. It's against the law to use real bullets within the town limits."

"No, no, they're real! Lord above!"

She rushed to the window and threw it open. The sound that came flying through the window was now unmistakable. Bikoff heard rifles and revolvers. A bomb exploded. The

window-panes rattled. Anxious lights flared up in the house opposite Bikoff's. The nurse, making the sign of the cross, knelt down in the middle of the floor, moaning:

"God, oh, God!"

Kikin, spinning round, appeared in the doorway in hat and coat, standing on tiptoe. His face, lit up by the thin rays of the lamp, seemed deathly and made of brass.

"What is this anyway?" asked Bikoff. "And where is Jakov?"

"Gone."

"Where? When?"

Taking off his cap, the hunchback replied guiltily, making a hopeless gesture with his deformed arms:

"I warned him, Egor Ivanovich, not to go, not to get mixed up in it. It's true they deceived them . . ."

"Who deceived who?"

"The State, the government. Yasha said to them, 'No, comrades, that won't do. It's a shame!' He's gone off with the Kononovsky metal workers."

Bikoff seemed to be grasping something: it was as though he were being lashed with a whip. He stuck his feet out of bed and growled:

"My dressing-gown! Take me to the window. You, woman, come here!"

The nurse got up, went to the window and, looking out, made a gesture of despair.

"Do as you like. The place is on fire. I'm going home!"

But she did not go. She remained crouching there by the window. Kikin, meantime, hurried Bikoff into his dressing-gown and muttered:

"Something might fly through that window."

"Be quiet!" Bikoff said sternly. "You dirty hypocrite! You pimp!"

Shots sounded quite near in the street. One could hear a loud wail: *Ah . . . aah . . . aah . . .* There was pounding at the gate below, doors banged, axes could be distinctly heard hewing away at heavy boards, and a woman's shrill voice anxiously crying out: "Come round through the garden!"

Bikoff had reached the window. He was in time to see a black horse gallop swiftly by, ridden by a man who seemed

glued to its back. This made the animal look like a camel. One could hear by the uneven sound of its hooves that it was lame. Three shadows, walking one by one, passed rapidly in the dusk, pressing close to the hedges and walls, the last dragging a long beam, the end of which scraped over the cobble-stones and caught against the pillars.

"Thieves," Bikoff decided, but he felt growing within him a strange emptiness and a silence in which all sounds were drowned and thoughts faded out. Another shot: the bullet shook the dry leaves on the tree outside.

"A ricochet!"

Close by his side he heard the feeble voice of Kikin:

"You'd better stand back from the window."

He pushed the hunchback away.

"Rioting, you say?"

"It's the workmen revolting, Egor Ivanovich."

"And what of Yasha? Is he in this?"

"He's with the Kononovsky men."

"Go and call him," ordered Bikoff, waving his hand out of the window. "Tell him to come here immediately! You devil, why didn't you tell me the truth about this?"

"Yasha told you . . ." Kikin murmured guiltily. "He told you about them being armed."

"Go! If Yasha is killed I'll make your life a hell on earth!"

Bikoff's jaw was trembling so violently that it seemed as though his beard was falling off. He stood magnificently erect, like an old soldier at attention, grey and gaunt, inside the dim patch of the window. His eyes were wide open, his teeth chattered, his legs shook and the dressing-gown dropped from his bony shoulders. Kikin went out.

"I'm going home," wailed the nurse.

Bikoff sat down heavily, though he still kept his eyes on the window filled with fog. There was not much shooting now. One could hear the blows of the axes. Outside something heavy had fallen with a bang against the gate or the hedge. Boards cracked—what did it all mean? And those telegraph wires—how tight they were! How they quivered! Then, with unnatural swiftness, a dull thud sounded from the street, wood creaked and a familiar high, but hoarse, voice cried out:

"Take off the gates! There are barrels in the yard. Here now! Roll them out!"

"My barrels! In my yard!" thought Bikoff.

In the street under the windows shouts were heard:

"Tie the wires to the lantern! Across the street there! Knock down the lamp-posts! My leg! Look out, you devil!"

"I can distinguish Jakov's voice," Bikoff said aloud.

What was he doing? Bikoff did not want to think about that. Leaning on the window-sill, he muttered to himself:

"He's protecting me. He won't let them enter."

The nurse was now running to and fro, imploring God to save her from the intruders.

"Sit down!" thundered Bikoff, "or I'll thrash you. And be quiet!"

He threatened her with the stick he used to knock on the ceiling as a signal to Kikin. His jaw quivered and the hair of his moustache got into his mouth. He kept pulling it as well as his beard, but the jaw went on dropping. The silence within him grew more sinister, the emptiness deeper, while the noise from the street, the cries, the creaking of wood and pistol shots from afar poured into it. He heard a sharp command at the gate:

"Aim at the priest!"

The dawn began to break at last, and the black shadows of moving men became a little more clearly defined. There were over a hundred of them in the street, mostly crowded together to the left of Bikoff's house. They had barricaded the street, using telegraph-poles which they had dragged by their tangled wires, like whales by the whiskers. From neighbouring yards one man was dragging bales of hay, a cart was rolled out, the gate was being demolished to the sound of cries of encouragement. The windows of all the silent houses meantime stared at this bustle with the glassy eyes of the blind. Behind them you could perceive shadows moving. Suddenly, in the distance, a military bugle sounded, sharply calling to action.

"Look out!" a deep voice shouted.

Something cracked and screeched, and a heavy thud resounded—stones falling in a heap.

"They're wrecking something," said Bikoff, turning to the nurse as if he demanded her advice. "You hear that? They're breaking things."

The early morning air chilled him. He wrapped himself more tightly in his dressing-gown and leaned far out of the window. He saw Jakov carrying a crowbar over one shoulder; he was now running towards Bikoff's gate. Behind him were ten other men armed with rifles and axes. One of them had a large wooden beam. They pounded at the gate while Jakov leaped over the wall into the yard like a cat, and shouted to his companions:

"Take the gates off! Here are the barrels!"

Incredible! A horrible dream! Bikoff could not believe in the reality of what he saw.

"The thieves!" It was the nurse's hysterical scream that brought him back to his senses.

The gate was flung open and men rushed into the grounds.

"Get out!" shouted Bikoff, with all his remaining strength.

"Get out, you dirty dogs! Yasha, kick them out!"

Jakov looked up, his face round as a pancake, and cried:

"We've been deceived, uncle. The people are being massacred!"

"Egor Ivanovich," came the plaintive voice of the hunchback, "come away from the window!"

The left side of the gate rose, swayed and fell into the yard with a heavy crash. The men dragged it out into the streets and returned to unhinge the other. The barrels were then rolled out through the gap in the wall. A little hunchbacked man seemed to be everywhere in the crowd, hurrying back and forth.

Bikoff, dumb with rage, seized a potted cactus and flung it into the midst of the crowd. It was a bad shot, hitting no one. He saw this, but turned to the nurse, crying:

"Give me the other flower-pots, the chairs, anything!"

He shouted in such a savage tone that the woman was terrified and, bending double, dashed about the room in silence, bringing the flower-pots, dragging the chairs towards him. Bikoff, groaning with pain, swaying, summoning his last strength, threw one thing after another out into the crowd, cursing and yelling:

"I'll kill you, Yasha! You monster, Koska!"

Then someone fired a shot at the window. The bullet struck the pane, bits of ceiling fell to the floor. The nurse shrieked and fell on the floor, crouching on it. Bikoff turned on her savagely:

"Nonsense! You're still alive. Give me something else to throw, you bitch!"

At that moment, there was more shooting outside, quite near this time, and a thin voice could be heard wailing: "They're coming round!"

Bikoff saw his nephew crouch and crawl back into the yard, dragging one leg behind him. The bearded man, dropping the shaft, fell backward, hitting his head so that the cap flew off. An instant later, a detachment of grey soldiers emerged out of the mist by the gate with fixed bayonets.

"Surrender!" shouted the leader. "Lie down!"

Some attempted to run and the soldiers shot at them. Bikoff broke into wild laughter. He stretched his hand out, pointing downwards, stamping his feet, and roared:

"See that fellow over there! The one that's crawling! That one in the hat—impale him! And the hunchback trying to hide behind the barrel, the hunchback!"

The nurse had opened the other window and was also howling:

"Kill them! Chase them! Kill . . ."

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# THE STORY OF A HERO



## *The Story of a Hero*

**W**HEN I was a child and not yet afraid of people, I was afraid of cockroaches, bees and rats; later on, it was storms, winds and darkness that filled me with fear. When I heard thunder, I shut my eyes very tight so as not to see the blue quiver of the window-panes lit up by lightning. Somebody had made me believe—or perhaps I made it up myself—that lightning, as it tears apart the sky, lays bare a great inferno, over there behind the blue that you can see on cloudless days. The blue is the smoke of a fire that envelopes the whole world, the stars are its sparks. At any moment the earth can flare up like a cherry-stone thrown into a bonfire, flame like the sun and then, turning into coal, hang down in the sky like a second moon.

Darkness was the thing I feared most. I took it to be not an *absence* of light but an independent force hostile to it. When its grey, impalpable dust threw a shadow in the air and, condensing, growing black, swallowed up the trees, the houses, the furniture in the room, I waited for it to become hard as stone and everything alive to be petrified in it, including myself. I always wanted to touch darkness, get in contact with it. I would stretch a hand into dark corners and, carefully folding my fingers into a fist, feel an unpleasant cold moisture settling down on the skin of my palm. Darkness was the soot of a super-astral fire that disintegrated everything visible, turning it into black dust. I know that such images may be too complicated for a boy of ten or thirteen, but it seems to me that they were mine at that age. Still more, almost to insanity, I feared the whistling and the wail of winter snowstorms. On these satanic nights, when everything on earth whirls in a frenzy, the trees sway as though trying to tear themselves away from the earth and fly with the clouds of snow—on these nights it seemed to me that some evil forces had determined to lay bare the earth, sweep off the towns,

forests and people, and leave me alone in a dead silence, in a cold white desert. My soul filled with the anguish of an infinite emptiness, my terrified heart hung and trembled in it like a midget between the sky and the sea. The accursed, mocking whistling of the wind echoed inside me piercingly, freezing and mutilating my body. I hid my head in my pillow, stuck my fingers into my ears, but went on hearing this devastating evil whistle in my soul.

One might gather from this that I was a sickly little boy, but that was not the case. I was strong, well-fed, seemed more mature, older than other boys of my age, and was considered more serious than them. Yes, I was physically fit, and I think that the source of my fear before the manifestations of nature lay precisely in my healthy condition—it was the natural biological fear of a man confronted by something he is unable to understand, threatening him with destruction. I am convinced that a sick man cannot experience fear as acutely as a healthy one does.

I was my mother's only son. I don't remember my father, a church architect; he died when I was four. His place had been taken by my uncle, my mother's brother, a widowed priest. He loved and spoiled me as much as did my mother, the maid, Dunia, Nikita, the water-carrier, and all the other members of our household.

"What do we need snowstorms for?" I would ask my uncle.

Large and fat, very handsome and gay, a good guitar-player and a great gambler, he would put his arm round me affectionately and say something meant to console, but not consoling:

"Such is the law of nature, established in accordance with the will of God."

And, stroking my hair, he would turn to my mother:

"He has a philosophic turn of mind."

He was always willing to talk to me, and I liked to listen to the smooth speech, the round, soft words, the stories about three forces governing the world: God, nature, and man's reason. But I was unable to grasp the mysterious link between these forces, and the more I listened, the more did God retreat

into the obscurity of the unknown, the more fearful did nature become and the more vague the part played by reason.

A coarse but painfully obtrusive allegory became fixed in my mind: Nature was the washerwoman, Karaseva, a huge, filthy person whose nickname was Wetty. She lived in our yard near the stables. I had been observing her for some ten years, and it seemed to me that during that time her fat, red face with the mocking glance of her impudent, greasy eyes never changed. She was about forty and, indefatigable in work, she was equally indefatigable in lechery. Like many women of her age, she suffered from a common erotic trouble—a passion for youths, whom she defiled with the same avidity as sexually-obsessed men defile virgins.

Cynical and cunning, when she was sober she behaved in an unctuous, affectionate manner, her artificial sing-song voice sounded apologetic, her face became broader, and the bold, brazen eyes smiled in confusion. But almost every Saturday, towards the evening, she got preposterously drunk and was seized with fits of meaningless frenzy. Revealing the strength of a muscular man and a savage desire for destruction, she beat up her three friends—repulsive women like herself—smashed glasses, broke chairs and tables, and one day attacked with an axe the water-carrier, Nikon, a meek, pious, silent old man, who always dressed in white in the summer, like a corpse. In the hours of her frenzy, human reason appeared in the yard in the shape of a Tartar policeman. Silently, he knocked Wetty down with one blow of his fist; his lips tightly pressed together, he grunted as he tied her up hand and foot with dirty sheets rolled into ropes. She never protested, and only muttered with a smile:

“Go on, go on, do your tying up, you devil.”

The policeman snorted as he twined the rope around her and hissed through his teeth:

“I know you, you slut. I know you . . .”

One day, as she lay tied up on the ground by the stables, I heard Nikon say to her:

“You’ve no pity on life, Wetty.”

She replied hoarsely:

“What’s life got to do with me? Fine thing, life . . .”

I was not the only one to find the drunken washerwoman terrifying. I was unspeakably afraid of her. She roused in me a feeling of sharp disgust, an unconquerable repugnance.

"Why does she live?" I asked my uncle, and he answered gently:

"Reason finds no solution to this question. To the query, 'Why?' we find no other reply but 'It's God's will.'"

I am not ashamed to admit that the coarse comparison of Nature with Wetty and of human reason with the Tartar policeman followed me into my adult years and perhaps even now this allegory continues to pursue me. And, of course, it strengthened and deepened my fear of manifestations of life, too blatantly unreasonable and hostile to me, a man.

When I learnt that a mosquito can infect you with malaria and that rats are carriers of the plague, I was nonplussed. A mere mosquito my enemy, and a frightened mouse my enemy, too?

I pestered my uncle with the childish question: "Why?" And finally he lost his temper:

"Look here, my boy," he said, drawing together his thick eyebrows, "a boy of your age should not ask so many questions. You should be given a good beating—that's what you deserve. Stop it!"

My mother also told me:

"Stop plaguing your uncle like that. Why do you keep asking those silly questions? It isn't done."

But, although that's what they said, they went on boasting in front of their friends of the inquisitiveness of my mind. They thus fanned my conceit, and at the same time created a barrier between us. I already felt much cleverer than my contemporaries and had no friend among them. At school, everybody realised very soon that I was a coward and teased me mercilessly about it. I was clumsy, uncouth, games seemed to me a dangerous occupation and did not attract me, I was afraid of internecine school clashes and the brawls among street urchins and schoolboys reminded me of the elemental fights between Gustave Aimard's Red Indians and Europeans. In this way, I very soon learnt to know the pride of loneliness, and vaguely realised its importance as the only domain in which an independent personality can develop freely.

I was an average pupil, studying conscientiously, but without enthusiasm. Natural sciences, of which my uncle spoke with such respect, did not overcome my fears of the manifestations of Nature, did not even attenuate them. These sciences were inculcated into us with great ardour by a young teacher, Zhdanov, a round, vivacious little man who resembled a monkey. The boys had nicknamed him "The Ball." He had a hypothesis of his own on the structure of matter, a passion for electricity, and kept shouting during the lessons:

"All the mysteries of life are concealed in electric energy and we will soon find a solution to them!"

He was eccentric, sentimental and had a new love affair every spring. He seemed to me frivolous, with something of the clown about him that offended me. One day, during the lesson, I was unable to grasp the meaning of a sentence. That infuriated Zhdanov, and he said to me:

"You are a conscientious youth, no doubt, but you have no inclination for science. I cannot quite make out what it is that you have an inclination for. In my opinion, you should be studying in the seminary, not here."

The teacher of history was Milij Novak, tall, bony, stooping, with a small, bald head, the hairless face of a spinster and a huge Adam's apple. He seemed to me uncannily hideous. Almost one-third of his face was concealed under large, dark-rimmed spectacles. He was absent-minded, walked with an unsteady, swaying gait, dressed in a slovenly manner, his shoes were heel-trodden, his trousers stuck out like balloons on his knees. I noticed that he was afraid of horses. Before crossing the street from one pavement to the other, he looked fearfully to both sides, waited until all the cabs had passed and then, with head bent down, walked rapidly across, swaying and stumbling.

In an even, colourless voice, he gave us tedious history lessons, and became animated only when he justified the cruelty of the Tsars. He usually spoke with his hands deeply ensconced in his pockets, but at such moments he would slowly pull out the left hand, raise his finger, bent like a hook, to the level of his shoulder and try to impress upon us:

"Peter the Great was cruel, but circumstances demanded it."



In his dry exposition, history fascinated me by its abundance of terrifying matter. It is probable that during his lessons I particularly stressed all the examples of cruelty, for as he listened to my answers he nodded his head with approval.

"Yes, that is so. The Tsar Ivan the Terrible was fierce, but the times desired that of him. Yes."

He sometimes set me up as an example to the other boys and that intensified their hostility towards me. I was in the sixth form when Novak, meeting me one day in the street, asked me to come and see him.

"Come in tomorrow, later on in the evening," he added in a whisper.

He lived in the wing of a house situated in a garden, on the charity of a silent, dignified old woman. His darkened room was crowded with books, a large table stood in the middle of it, also piled up with books; there was a bed by the wall and a wardrobe in the corner. In the garden, wrapped up in darkness, fell a lazy, warm rain; the leaves on the trees tinkled quaintly: this dry, silky sound seemed to be essential to Novak's room; it always filled the familiar twilight. Grey butterflies flew in through the open window and danced over the table, around the lamp shielded by a green shade. Bent like an arch, dark and motionless, his green bald skull inclined over the table, Novak softly persuaded me to try for the philological and historical faculty.

"You have a taste for history, Makaroff, and I suggest that you take private lessons with me. I will give you books and direct your reading."

I was flattered by the consideration he showed me and accepted his offer. He took a small book, bound in red leather, from the table and stroked it with his palm.

"Here is a book that you should read very attentively. Please take great care of it. We'll have a talk about it later on."

It was Carlyle's "On Hero-worship." I was not very fond of serious books, preferring stories of adventure, translated from foreign languages, but this book I read scrupulously and although I don't remember whether I liked it, there was something in it that satisfied my literary taste, bred

on Robinson Crusoe and the adventurous heroes of Fenimore Cooper, Mayne Reid and Gustave Aimard. I was taken aback when Novak revealed to me the philosophy of that small book. With a cold, obdurate force, in a soft voice that was all the more impressive, he said that people taken as a mass were on the whole impersonal, primitive-minded, monotonous. They had only one desire—to increase the outward comforts of life, but they were not keen to learn its mysteries. They ignored and despised all creativeness. They were unable themselves to improve the ugly and difficult conditions of life, unable to invent, experiment—man, the person, the individual alone, could rule, create, produce. “The people have always lived, exploiting the spiritual energy of the individual.” These memorable dry words resounded in my ears and the crooked finger that seemed to want to pull out my eyes remained firmly set in my memory. Under the pressure of words, his Adam’s apple protruded repulsively.

“Without Ivan the Terrible, the great Peter, the German Princess Catherine, without Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, the world would not have known Russia, or become conscious of it. History is always the work of units, the achievement of heroes. Dante and Petrarch made Italy. Milton, Hume, Hobbes made England . . .”

He pronounced the names of men of whom I knew nothing but their names. He went on asking:

“What would France be without Rabelais, Descartes, Voltaire; Germany without Goethe, Fichte, Wagner? What would all the nations of Europe be without their poets and thinkers that inspired them, gave them each their original face? Look at the black tribes of Africa, at the Kalmiks, the Kirghiz, the Bashkirs . . .”

Spreading his hands on the table, he moved his fingers rapidly and nervously and continued to lower his voice—this forced me to concentrate and convinced me that I was being told secrets known only to Novak. I remember that I longed for him to take off his spectacles—they were the only familiar things left about this man, as far as I was concerned. I had never seen him angry, not even irritable; dry and dreary always, he behaved in class with the even calm of a workman executing a well-known and boring task. But on that night

he altered unrecognisably. I could perceive wrath and indignation in his whispered words and it seemed as though he were complaining, as he revealed to me the disappointments which had so affronted him. Talking seemed to go to his head like wine. He kept bending his long body convulsively, and a strange, eerie sound, characteristic of people who stammer, rattled in his throat between the words: "Up-op . . . !"

"Genius is independent of nations," he said. "Our greatest genius, Pushkin, was the descendant of an Arab; Jukovsky was half-Turkish; Lermontov, a Scot. Do you see? Heroes are beyond nations—above, always above! In every country you will find rulers of foreign blood. It is a matter of indifference who inspires the people and leads them—be it the Jew Christ or the Greek Plato, a Hindu or a Chinaman like Lao-Tse. Rousseau and Tolstoy are men of the same spirit and, in fact, of the same language. . . . Heroes and leaders are a special tribe of individuals who have hardly anything in common with the masses."

I felt there was some truth in his words and that it put me under an obligation that strangely upset me.

"Man and the masses are not the same—far from it," he went on. "Man is an enemy of the reality established by the people—that is why they hate him. History is the quarrel of one against many, a quarrel stirred up in the people by a desire for quietude, in man by a passionate urge for action. Therefore history will always be imbued with cruelty—it cannot, simply cannot, be otherwise. Yes."

When he saw me to the door, he whispered:

"Don't trust socialists. Their teaching is dangerous, impregnated with lies. It is a teaching against the individual. Do you understand? Don't trust them."

And he went on talking about socialists, saying things that were meant to inspire fear, but which I, totally exhausted, did not grasp any longer. I remember his light but clinging hand on my shoulder, the quiver of his fingers and the black gleam behind the spectacles—all most unpleasant. I have, of course, simplified his ideas, made them sound coarser. I was only seventeen when I first heard them, and they were unfamiliar.

Walking home along the silent streets, I felt a new anguish creep over me. Up to that night, life had been a simple thing for me. You see, I had never seen anything heroic in myself, I had never longed to fight for a cause with anyone or anything. I was a very ordinary youth of middle height, plump, pampered by my mother who worried a lot about my health and infected me with an abnormal hypochondria. I liked to lie on a couch with a book, wonder at the agility and courage of heroes, brood on the difference between myself and a criminal, revel in my compassion for the unfortunate, and rejoice when fate, having ingeniously tortured them, smiled at them again. It was interesting to learn that there were people who were attracted by danger and anxiety, who enjoyed providing for the happiness of their neighbours — but, personally, such people had no interest for me.

I also had no use for Novak and Carlyle. At home in my bed, I thought resentfully:

“What do heroes and masses matter to me?”

I was convinced that I could live my life without coming in contact with them. After all, there were thousands of people living in the town who did not know of and were not concerned with the philosophy of Carlyle, had no use for heroes, rulers, socialism, and all the matters that disturbed Novak so absurdly. I even found it slightly comical to think of his anxious words about socialists. I knew that in the last form at school there were several arrogant and sulky boys who considered themselves socialists. For some reason, I particularly disliked the idea that at the head of them was the son of our marshal of nobility, Bolotoff, a bold and persistent lad. He was the school's hero. Having one day pulled a drowning woman, who I believe was drunk, out of the river, he walked about with the gait of a sailor, his legs far apart, whistling and spitting through his teeth.

In my class, too, there was a hero. His name was Rudometoff. He was the son of the local examining magistrate, a handsome boy of great physical strength, and a drunkard. Legends were formed about his dissolute life. He was feared and envied, but he looked at everyone with half-closed eyes, with the contempt of the exceptional being, and when questioned by teachers gave truly exceptional replies. Not only

the boys, but sometimes even the masters, laughed heartily at him. Only Novak did not laugh. He used to murmur:

"Yes. Well, you thought of that just to make people laugh. I'm giving you a bad mark."

I liked Rudometoff's independent attitude to teachers and envied his ability to find peculiar words that stuck in my memory. One day at Zhdanov's lesson, he said:

"I prefer crooked lines. They seem alive to me, capable of independent movement, whereas a straight line is hopelessly dead."

This, too, made the others laugh. Zhdanov admired him, but used to shout at him:

"You've got a good brain, but you're confoundedly lazy, a criminal, that's what you are!"

Thinking over Novak's words, I recalled all the heroes at school, tried to picture them in the future creating history and decided to get rid of Novak. I chose an easy way for doing it—I just stopped learning history. At first he seemed not to notice this, but then said:

"Yes. Well, this is very bad."

After a time, he invited me again to his house and in the tone in which doctors talk to sick children began to ask why I had stopped my lessons. I can't remember what lies I told him, all I do remember is an obstinate desire to make him angry. But I did not succeed. Holding me by the shoulder, he went on talking of the same subject: the battle of the people against their rulers, their heroes.

"The hero always wins—even if he is physically beaten in the end," he told me, while the thought flashed across my mind that if he were to take off his spectacles, I would see the gleam of a madman in his eyes. I left him with the conviction that this man was uncongenial to me. How could I get rid of him? The sudden illness and rapid death of my uncle came to my aid: he caught a sore throat during a church procession, then an elusive, idiotic streptococcus penetrated his brain and in two days killed that healthy, handsome man. I don't believe anybody ever experienced so deeply the terrible absurdity of death and the pathetic helplessness of life as I did when I saw my uncle's blue, disfigured face, his tangled beard and hair

strewn over the pillow—his hair seemed to stand on end with terror.

How mournful the sound of church bells, announcing the death of a servant of the church!

That death hit me very hard. I loved my uncle. He was healthy, gay and reliable. He had a quiet certitude that everything was well with the world. He used to say:

“Those who love laughter know well how to live.”

Now I was no more able to ask him wherein lay the need of streptococci or whether they liked laughter. And I would not hear any more the soft baritone in which sounded the deep note of a 'cello:

“My boy, remember that the more questions one asks, the more stupid they become. That was already known by Lactantius.”

He liked to slander theosophists and philosophers, attributing to them his own humorous remarks or applying the saying of one to another. But when he was caught out in error or misquotation, he laughed, saying:

“Who's the worse for it? Will the small miseries of this world be increased if I represent Plato as a sceptic?”

He often used to say:

“I believe because it is absurd to do so.”

And when he was told that ‘because’ was superfluous, he would reply:

“No, ‘because’ refers to faith itself.”

He was solemnly brought to the churchyard and buried in the unyielding earth. I stood by the grave until it was covered up with snow. There was a thick snowfall on that day. It was as though a bone had been removed from my body. I lost strength, stopped going to school, and felt ill with depression.

Novak was soon offered a job in a Ministry in Petersburg. When I saw him off I was amazed to realise that the departure of that man was just as unpleasant to me as had been my relationship with him. Probably that was caused by the fact that my uncle's death had rendered my sense of loneliness more acute. I needed a man, just one man. I had friends, it is true. They drank vodka, made love to schoolgirls, visited brothels. I did not like vodka, was afraid of contagion. My

male instincts were fully and willingly satisfied by a maid, Dunia, a woman of about thirty, shameless, cunning, and greedy about money. I was shy and timid with girls, did not know what to say to them—there was, besides, nothing much to be said, the majority of them did not read the books that I liked. When I admitted my fondness for Dumas' novels, they laughed with insulting condescension. My mother liked good food and in this lay the chief interest of her life. She collected at her house gastronomes like herself and fed them—they did the same to her in their turn. A good-looking, sanguine woman, with smiling blue eyes, she moved lazily, spoke slowly. This gave her a special significance and attracted men.

When I was in my last form, my mother started a love affair with a doctor, a gay lad, who had just finished his studies. She was against my going to the University, was afraid of "politics," convinced that I would immediately join the students' movement and die in prison, in exile. It was easy for her to persuade me to wait for another year, take a rest from school, and I agreed to this, although I never suspected that she was scheming to get me married that year. She schemed in vain. I was opposed to marriage. My small experience of sex did not inspire me with too favourable an opinion of it and inculcated a considerable dose of—well—physiological scepticism. Was it worth while to bear for many years with a lot of daily discomfort and anxiety, only to receive in recompense a moment of pleasant spasm? Was it worth while for that moment to keep at your side a being of another sex, another psychology, and one who for some reason considers herself in the right to ask what you think and what you feel? It would have been fine if one could prepare a wife in the kitchen, like soup, so that she should taste differently every time.

I had read in books that women search for "heroes" and have a liking for strong, handsome men, and, as far as my experience went, life confirmed this theory. Everything that I read about "love" struck me as more or less happy stretches of imagination, like a fig-leaf with which one attempts to conceal coarse and smutty feelings, that lower men to the shamelessness of dogs and goats. I always found something

theatrical and artificial about women—even about young girls. Also, I am not afraid to say it, a parasitic longing to pin themselves on to a man. It seemed to me that women stare so often into mirrors, not to check the condition of their weapons of seduction, but because they are even less convinced than I am of the reality of their existence. Perhaps these ideas came to me later, not when I was only twenty and simply couldn't imagine myself as a husband or a father, could not venture on a step which would deprive me of all independence and disturb my peace.

A year later, I became a medical student, and in my second year fulfilled all my mother's premonitions: I became automatically involved in demonstrations, driven by the police with a herd of students to the Mikhailovski Hall and from there deported to my home town. My mother, frightened and hysterical, declared she would not let me go back to Moscow and that it would kill her if I disobeyed her. I did not protest. The University repelled me by its noise, politics, groups and quarrels. It was strange to think that scientists were produced in this irritating hustle, that the spiritual life of the country emerged from it. Medicine proved to be the wrong science for me. I could not bear to delve in the entrails of smelly corpses and was terrified to imagine myself as a corpse from which a cheerful young man with a cigarette in his mouth removes the heart with a silly little knife. These young men, with their cigarettes, their eyes half closed from smoke, frightened me almost as much as the corpses, which two or three days ago were just as much alive and probably as stupid as these future healers of the body. As they prepared the corpses, they laughed and joked, and it seemed to me that they put on in front of each other this indifference to the question of the mystery of life, of the soul, which somehow melted away from the heap of putrid, hideously carved flesh. I could see, of course, that some of them were inspired by a sincere desire to learn the truth about a man's body—therefore, all the more surprising was their indifference to the secret power that moved that body, stimulated feeling and thought in it. Here, in front of me on the table, lay the corpse of a gay and capricious girl, Klavdia Ivanova. She had killed herself two days ago, having drunk a solution of prussic acid. Her eyes



protruded, the brows were raised unevenly, one higher than the other, the eyelids tightly stretched over the eyes, dilated with terror and pain. The lips were torn apart in a dumb cry, and it seemed to me that I could hear that cry—it grew, spread about the room in a penetrating smell that brought with it giddiness and an excruciating nausea. My townsman, Rudometoff, dissecting the greenish stomach of the little corpse, muttered as boorishly as usual and more casually than usual:

“Prostitution is the profession of hysterical women.”

I knew that he and another student, who was standing by the table with his hands folded behind his back, had both been on familiar terms with the girl and had probably both availed themselves of that body which Rudometoff was now cutting up with such indifference. I did not expect either of these men to say a few gentle words of human compassion about the dead girl, a few useless but comforting words—I did not expect or want anything from them, but it was unbearable to remain among them. I went away and, as I left them, Rudometoff made the mocking remark:

“A poor brain, but a good flair.”

On the whole, people treated me mockingly. I was not “good company.” And Rudometoff was impudent and rude. He was a good speaker, played a prominent part among the group of “academic” students, the enemies of “politics.” Some feared, others hated him, others, again, loved him as dogs love their masters.

So I parted with the University without regret. A few months later, my mother’s friend, the doctor, got me a job in the Governor’s chancery. His brother was the Governor’s personal secretary. Unnoticed by all, I remained in that job for two years. I was there in the frantic period of the Japanese War and the revolution of 1905-1906. The Governor, a fragile little old man with pouting lips and an expression of perpetual offence, had only one care in the world—to find the padded waistcoat that no bullet could pierce. My immediate boss, the doctor’s brother, was a man of about 35. Smooth and bald, he wore stiff, starched collars, gambled madly, suffered from claustrophobia, and collected china. My other colleagues were half brutes, half phantoms. Only one of them, a young man of unknown origin, Drosdoff, a black, perky little embryo,

sharply contrasted with the others by his irritating restlessness. He knew everything that happened in town and daily brought into the dark, smoky rooms of the chancery something nerve-wracking, that set one on edge, aroused anxiety. He sat opposite me by the window shaded by the thick foliage of a lime-tree and when, on clear, windy days, shadows played on his sharp, sallow face, it seemed that the boy was laughing silently, inventing some nightmarish wickedness. I always look at a man's hands. His dark little hands, with their slender fingers and their sharp, narrow nails, resembled the claws of a bird of prey. He constantly drummed his fingers on the table or moved them as though tying and untying knots. With the elemental instinct of a degenerate, he very quickly got me measured and, like a wicked autumn fly, buzzed on hour after hour about the wild rioting of the soldiers returning from the front, the revolts of the peasants incited by the soldiers, the unrest in towns, about fear that spread so increasingly that the earth seemed to perspire with it. He himself appeared to be fearless, but it gave him a curious pleasure to frighten me.

"It's s-starting!" he would say softly, pronouncing the first part of the word with a sinister hissing sound.

"What's starting?"

With a soft whistle, he would hide his sharp nose behind some papers, without answering me. He read and went through papers first with one eye, then with the other, closing them in turn. It was clear that this embryo of a being rejoiced in the chaos of life. He was not one of those indifferent, and therefore harmless, observers, who are entertained by fires, murders and street accidents, nor the type of audience in the theatre pit who equally enjoy drama and comedy. No, I felt that chaos filled him with such joy that he would gladly take part in the development of drama, be ready to produce it. He roused in me the expectation of a misfortune which was going to shatter my life.

I was in that state of mind when I was sent on a mission to a small provincial town, hidden among gardens, on a hill, over a river. I stayed in the house of the Assistant Chief of Police, who had been badly hurt in a carriage accident when his horses bolted, frightened by the peasants. From the windows of this house I saw the peasants set fire to the estates.

Already in the evening the clouds on the south-eastern side, behind the river and the forest, grew crimson as though the sun was setting there as well, and when the darkness over the meadows became more condensed, a red saw of fire with its teeth upwards appeared over the forest. Then a flame flared up to the left, nearer to the town, and almost at once I heard a strange drone, wheels creaking, dogs howling. Right on the river's bank a large haystack blazed, then another, and still another. These three fires lit up the road, and on it were a line of carts and the ant-like procession of a black crowd. The tall chimney of the factory stood out in the darkness; a brick building sprung up on the shaggy earth, a long, grey shed that looked like the lid of a huge coffin, flared up and illuminated a white house with pillars and a verandah. One could see the water of the river. It had acquired a glow and seemed to be simmering. I watched all this as in a dream. I was awakened by black shadows passing my window.

"They're acting with system," said one of the shadows.

These words caused my sight to become unbearably acute, and all that I saw poured into my mind, flooding it with terror. And the sinister sentence came to my memory:

"It's s-starting!"

A dark wave of men poured on to the verandah. One could hear distinctly the noise of broken panes, the creak of the flames, the howling cries, the hubbub of talk. On the scarlet water of the river, boats appeared, gliding rapidly and unevenly, the oars glittering like the paws of a beetle. I presumed that the townspeople were rushing to join in the pilfering.

All night, until dawn, I remained standing by the window, watching the ant-like work of men. Well illuminated by the fire, they dragged clumsy objects, huge bundles, in all directions, pushed their way through and fought for them. I remember two of them seizing a white boulder; it burst and covered them with downy snow. A fantastic scarlet horse galloped along the shore of the river. The fire, like a red broom, rapidly swept the buildings from the earth, although a drizzling rain fell obstinately, and the darkness, imbued with smoke, became thicker and thicker. The fire made it red hot,

tore at it, spread wider and wider, while the condensed blackness turned men and horses into dark and purple silhouettes. These phantoms lived quivering for one or two minutes and then vanished and hid again in the shadows. I remembered my childish fear of darkness, but now I wanted it to become still thicker and heavier so that the fire and the people who had started it would be smothered in it and would disappear for ever. When, towards dawn, the rain increased, I saw with what was almost joy the fire sink to the earth, fade away and hide, and the black horses and men vanish.

At midday, there was a meeting of "right-minded" people in the square of the town. They killed, I believe, two or three rebels, went round the town with ikons and church banners, and in the evening, as I left, the little town was deserted and paralysed by the fear of the night. I, too, felt devastated. My brain was numb. The picture of the black crowd of people, destroying and setting fire to the fruit of their work, haunted my memory. That display of obvious insanity hit my reason like a stone, filling my whole being with an angry pain, rousing in me fear of men. On my way back I met an infantry detachment; a long-legged captain with red whiskers rode in front, the soldiers bravely trampled in the mud and sang a silly song about a blackbird. When I told him that he was too late, the captain cheered up. I was very much surprised by his shamelessly contented smile. On my return, I began to notice that the champions of a constitution, questioning me anxiously on what had happened in the provinces, could also barely conceal a joyful gleam in their eyes. Their preoccupation seemed insincere, their anxiety false. Even in the chancery there now reigned a new, light-hearted, jovial and unpleasant atmosphere and Drosdoff, fidgeting on his chair, smiled maliciously and became sharper, more irritating.

I felt it my duty to mention him to the Chief of Security, Colonel Behr. Drosdoff was placed under observation, a search was effected in his house—and my instinct had been right: the link between Drosdoff and one of the revolutionary organisations was established, some arrests took place, and I learnt with amazement that among the arrested one of the most dangerous men proved to be the deacon, a pupil of my uncle's. I will not—it's too painful and boring—speak of the

events known to all, of the shameful weakness of the Government, its mistakes, that added fire to the revolt. All that I saw with my own eyes was disgusting. I saw the workmen of the match factory and the soap factory march past our windows with red flags; a crowd of dirty, half-wild people, they walked looking fearfully at the windows of the houses as though expecting to have boiling water poured over them. The part of the goat in this herd of sheep was played by a lame old man, Baramsin, a former exile, the correspondent of radical papers; the chemist, Goldberg, was brandishing one of the red flags—since Christ there's never been a misfortune without a Jew in it. On both sides of the crowd, chasing it on its path of crime, young men unknown to me ran along like shepherds' dogs. It was just as much a procession of ants as it had been out there in the provinces behind the river. Only here the people seemed larger and more terrifying. A wind blew, angrily shaking the red flags, the unkempt hair, the tattered clothes. They walked haltingly, some too quickly, others carefully slowing down their pace. It seemed to me that all of them, equally overcome with fear, either wanted to face danger as quickly as possible or were wondering how to avoid it. The crowd, to tell the truth, did not frighten me. What was frightening were the madmen who were leading it. And when I pictured to myself that perhaps, at that same hour, on that same day, such madmen were leading blind crowds along the streets of all Russian towns in order to hurl them upon the tottering authorities, I heard the sinister sound of the snowstorm resound in my heart, the same sound which had roused such terror in me when I was a child.

On the square, in front of the Town Hall, old Baramsin was hit on the head and killed by a workman from the sanitary station. Goldberg was battered to death by lorry-drivers. The crowd then dispersed. But the next day, people with red flags, and others with portraits of the Tsar, again walked along the streets of the town. A bomb was dropped; the explosion tore off the leg of a mounted policeman, wounded a few people and killed a Jewish schoolgirl. In short, everything was being done, according to what was supposed to be the plan in those days of madness. A complete mental and physical wreck, I did not leave the house. I remembered with startling vividness

the words of my teacher, Novak, and realised that he had spoken profoundly important truths.

"History is made by individuals, it is the result of the creative work of heroes."

It was obvious: one man leads the crowd. The crowd of workmen was led by a lame, pathetic old man. But the insignificance of that hero was accounted for by the insignificance of the crowd, and I could not deny the heroism of the man who, leading the people to possible death, walks in front of them. I turned this matter over in my mind for a long time. Not being a hero myself, I naturally began to look for one in order to serve him in good faith, and shelter for my life at his side. But where was that hero? Who was he? It seemed to me that I might find him in the person of Colonel Behr. His secret and dangerous job of keeping order in the country corresponded to my trend of ideas and to the taste for crime stories that had been developed in me from childhood. The Colonel had also great personal charm: a tall, strong man with a distinguished face, a quiet smile in his grey eyes, he spoke in a condescending manner and with the mockery of a dare-devil. He told me that, disguised as a workman, he had attended various meetings of revolutionaries and that he had a mistress in their midst. I offered him my services. Behr questioned me at length about my life, and acquaintances, and my answers didn't satisfy him. With, I felt, no regret, he said that although my position among civil servants was not a bad one, he thought that I was too timid, shy and insufficiently supple.

"You'll find it hard to penetrate into the midst of revolutionaries. You're too straightforward. But, even if you do, I don't believe you'll last long with them—once or twice will be all you'll be good for."

There was something dull and automatic in his words. He seemed to speak as a hunter about game.

"Revolutionaries are bright chaps, you know. Not stupid at all."

After a moment's thought, he added, puffing at a cigar:

"Let me have some information about all that goes on among your friends—that'll do for the moment." And, as he

saw me out, he said, wearily and unexpectedly: "To tell the truth, my boy, it's all not quite to the point. Not quite. The matter is really very simple: we are in danger of being robbed and fleeced, whereas what we offer is to give our jackets and keep our shirts. If we want to go on living as we did, we need a man of power, capable of performing a miracle, even if it were a miracle of cruelty. That's all."

I left him, having realised that he was not the man I wanted, and very soon after that wrote a letter to Novak, exposing my state of mind and my ambitions. I knew from articles in liberal papers that Novak was playing a leading part among the monarchists and I was certain that I would get good advice from him. I received a wire:

"COME IMMEDIATELY WAITING."

And there, once again, I sat in front of that man. I hadn't seen him for five years, but he hadn't changed in that time: the dark spectacles hid, as before, one-third of his childishly small face, the tie was as awry as it had always been, and he seemed not to have taken off his jacket or changed his trousers in all these years. He had grown thinner: the skin on his cheeks and forehead had taken a darker shade, and the almost invisible hairs on his head had acquired the colour of ash. Even his room did not seem to differ from the dark kennel which he had occupied in our town: it was just as glum, just as crowded with books, with a table in the middle; but the windows did not look out into the garden, they stared at the wall of a stone pit; there was an archway in the wall that led into the next yard, and over it was a window with dirty window-panes. It was a very dreary and uncanny place to live in. Deafened by the frantic noise of the large town, blinded by its fog, I sat at the table and mentally relaxed, listening to the soft, familiar voice. It was daytime, about three o'clock, but the lamp on the table was already lit, and Novak, his hands in his pockets, swaying and shuffling in his heel-trodden slippers, walked about the room, asking me:

"What is it you want to do? What is it you want to safeguard?"

Without thinking, unexpectedly, I found the precise words of my reply:

"I want to protect myself from everything hostile to me."

"I see," he said, stopping in front of me with his head down. "I see. This is the reply of a man."

In forceful words, he repeated all the things I knew already, over which I had lately so obstinately meditated. Then, sitting down on the edge of the table, bending over me, swinging his foot in rhythm with his speech, he told me approximately this: Ambitious and reasonably intelligent people, not finding a suitable place in life for themselves, people with too much faith in the meaning of reason and forgetful of the unreasonable element in life, long for power—the legitimate desire of every man conscious that he is more important and forceful than the average. But they are making a mistake, which will inevitably carry sinister results for the hard and slow task of the leaders of mankind, who are steadily re-organising states on the unshakable foundation of mutual aid. The mistake occurs because socialists, stimulating in the masses the desire for power, imagine that they are stimulating energy of the mind, whereas, in fact, they only stir up the instincts: envy, anger, revenge.

"All the instincts," he repeated, and pulling his hands out of his pockets, spread out in front of my face ten crooked fingers. "In the masses, there is no instinct of social aim, none; it isn't developed yet. To a man of the masses, there is no need of a state, as there is no need of it for you and me. But you and I consciously resign ourselves to the necessity of a state organisation, whereas for those people no such resignation is possible. All people are anarchists by nature, and the further they go, the more anarchistic they become. But man knows that the time has not yet come for total licence. It will come only when the masses are divided into units conscious of their power, their significance and their right to live according to the laws of their spirit."

Bending still lower over me, he asked:

"You understand why the error of the socialists is criminal, why monarchy, a merciless, unflinching power, can bring us more rapidly than any other to anarchy, non-interference, full freedom of the individual? Think about it and you will realise that this is not a paradox. All newly-born truths appear to be paradoxes, and the most remarkable of them is that man will



remain the enemy of the people until the masses break up into millions of independent individuals."

He slid down from the table and, resuming his walk up and down the room, gaunt and flat as a shadow, seemed in the dusk like a being from another world. There was something phantom-like in his appearance and he reminded me of one of those weird and self-denying men whom I had vaguely read about in books, whose lives had been lonely, misunderstood, and to whom fate had been merciless. He advised me sternly—in fact, he ordered me—to read Dostoevsky, Leontiev, Nietzsche.

"Yes," he said, "particularly them! Anarchists in essence, monarchists through realisation of the necessity of being it."

He then told me that there was somebody who needed a modest and faithful secretary.

"At the moment, Rudometoff is working for him—d'you remember our Rudometoff?"

"Rudometoff?" I asked.

"Yes, but he is absent-minded, careless. Besides, he wants to get married. But he is clever . . ."

"Rudometoff!" I thought to myself, as I walked away in the fog, feebly illuminated by the multi-coloured bubbles of electric lanterns. Rudometoff was the man who had said that I had a poor brain. Now someone was to decide whether my brain was better than Rudometoff's. This someone was a man with large cheekbones, a thick black beard and the clumsy body of a bear. A full, fleshy lower lip protruded from his beard, the upper one was hidden by a moustache. He had unpleasant, very large ears; they stood out watchfully as though listening to what I was thinking, not to what I was saying. He looked at me stealthily with a glance directed into the distance—I have often noticed this glance in engine-drivers. His hands were so well kept that the skin on them shone like a leather glove. Filing his nails, he said to me very calmly and clearly:

"You have good recommendations and must live up to them. I demand of you conscientiousness and modesty—nothing more. I would like you to make a note of the fact that I am exacting."

He carefully pressed the button of the electric bell. It

seemed to me that he did it with special pleasure, like a child. Rudometoff entered the room. My boss nodded in my direction.

"Your substitute. You've just come in, I believe?"

"Yes," said Rudometoff.

In a small room crowded with cupboards, with a window overlooking the square, he exclaimed with astonishment:

"You?"

"How are you?" I said.

"You?" he repeated, looking at me with obvious scorn.

"That's very strange."

I did not ask him why it was strange and he never answered my greeting. Later on, I learnt that he, too, left the University before the end of his studies and had gone for some reason to Persia, where he had lived for two years. Unfolding some papers in front of me, he said, with a preoccupied air:

"Perhaps some of my private papers might have found their way here in a yellow envelope. If you find them, ring me up. I'll come and fetch them."

And lighting a cigarette and pulling on a glove he wished me luck, very casually and obviously insincerely. Yes. Shy and cowardly people are very observant. I went up to the window, looked down on to the square where people walked in all directions, some of them sauntering like frogs. In the fog they all seemed large and rotund, as though inflated, and I was glad not to be among them, but above them, alone in a severe, clean and dry room which the howling din of a strange town hardly reached.

I began to sort the papers and examine them, very anxious to find Rudometoff's envelope. I didn't. For two years I hoped to get hold of it and learn why Rudometoff had been so preoccupied about it. What was he afraid of? But Rudometoff was drowned, sailing in a yacht. I had expected him to end in a more sinister manner. It was interesting to sort the papers and read some of them. I got very excited over a project for reorganisation of the State: it was proposed to divide Russia into districts and put a Grand Duke at the head of each, with the powers of a Viceroy. It reminded one of a romantic period in the past, when Russia was also divided up. Deeply engrossed in my reading, I did not hear

my boss open the door into my room and was startled when I heard a clear voice ring out in the silence:

"There is no need to read the documents. The folders have a detailed list of contents. That's what you ought to study. The rest is superfluous and premature."

He spoke in this calm and severe tone for five minutes, examining his nails and stroking one hand with the palm of the other. He evidently liked his hands.

"You must always have in front of you the list of people in whom I am particularly interested. You must follow everything that is being said about them and by them."

I listened to him standing up. He left without shaking hands or bidding good-bye. But that did not offend me. I liked his calm and methodical way of speaking. I sensed the power in his clumsy body and heavy movements and was excited by the mystery that surrounded him.

I spent six quiet years in the room next to his study, which became more and more crowded with papers. During that time there is no doubt that things became more settled in Russia, and I had every right to believe that it was due to the work of my boss, and my modest assistance. Life seemed to return to its old familiar bed and flow more calmly and freely. For freedom means calm. In the streets of a town one feels more free at night than by day. That is not an ironical remark, not a joke—oh, no! My observations are derived from real, organic, not imaginary interest in man: he wishes to live freely, and chaos interferes with his freedom. A man is more free when away from people.

There was no doubt that my boss played a prominent and apparently independent part in monarchic circles. He lived in four rooms in a large five-storied house with a population equal to that of a small provincial town. His flat was looked after by the porter's daughter, Sasha, a red-haired, slim and supple young woman. He hardly ever received people at home—by day, anyway, he had very few visitors and then only people with prominent names. Lonely, silent, he sat quietly in his study from ten o'clock onwards, wrote, read and sorted his post, usually very voluminous. A certain number of the letters, the particularly important ones, he hid in his table, or in a large, heavy cupboard. He had letters from Governors,

archbishops, telephone calls from secretaries of ministers, high officials of the police—he spoke with all of them as he did with me, in a tone of acknowledged authority. At three o'clock he went to dine in a restaurant and returned home unfailingly for the evening post. I also left at three, returned to my duties at six, and remained busy at them till eight, typing the long letters of my chief, the letters of a convinced supporter of monarchy, impersonally, but firmly, believing in the power of its idea. He wrote in a heavy style, with long sentences, often using obsolete words.

“The spirit of revolt being the spirit of obvious insanity, the source of which lies in the envy for and covetousness of outward comforts of life, that is, of its material side, and incited with intent by the enemies of holy order, it would be propitious if your Grace would issue a decree in your diocese ruling that . . .”

The chief sent most of his letters and reports to be checked by Novak, who returned them with innumerable annotations, richly illustrated by quotations and historical data.

I understood his work to be that of a voluntary and independent observer of the development of revolutionary thought. He watched its growth, cleverly concealed among the representatives of the opposition: he kept about a dozen of their names written on a special pad, and I had to follow their speeches in the Duma, in the Press or at conferences. He had no faith in the Government branches set up to fight the revolution, held them in contempt, and, one day, seeing off Novak, said to him:

“Some of the most unmitigated idiots have ensconced themselves in the Police Department.”

I lived quietly by his side, I loved my work. I quickly learned to tear off the veil from secret thoughts, lay bare all wicked and false, but stinging and destructive ideas, by skillfully underlining certain sentences and words. Novak visited the chief more often than anybody else. It seemed to me that he usually came on rainy, foggy or stormy days. It is remarkable how noiselessly this disembodied, phantom-like man walked on the earth. His habit of holding his dry, cold hands in the pockets of his trousers, seemed to me significant and symbolical. I saw in it a squeamish reluctance to come into

physical contact with life and the power of his spiritual influence became more and more palpable and momentous. I could feel this power in the whole Press that defended the foundations and principles of monarchy, and it was clear to me that my chief, who was a machine working under the steam of Novak, lived on that power and breathed with it. One day, as they were saying good-bye in my room, Novak remarked in a whisper, as usual:

"One should point out again and again that throughout the centuries, in all countries, particularly acute errors of the mind were wisely punished by death. I repeat—by death."

"This is being done," my chief replied.

"Yes. But done in a hole-and-corner way and therefore it hasn't got the necessary menacing quality. Public executions should be re-established. *They*, after all, execute publicly, their hangmen are fearless. Fearlessness establishes the justice of an action. Yes. The numerically weak act openly and therefore adorn simple murder with the halo of prowess, the glory of an heroic deed. The numerically strong, possessing the right to execution because they are the majority, execute in secret, in hiding, and transform a legitimate natural act of self-defence into a crime. Do you see the idiocy, the absurdity of it? The cowardice, perhaps?"

Stopping by the door leading to the stairs, he added:

"And torture. Public torture. Flagrantly. In broad daylight. Yes."

My chief stroked his hands gently and nodded, and when Novak had left, he said as he walked past me:

"Your teacher is a wonderful man."

Oh, yes, I knew that. When I saw Novak, my fear of men vanished, being substituted by a holy terror of my teacher who, as I said, became more and more spectral and like a shadow.

I respected my chief. His life was, in my eyes, the heroic deed of a believer who had devoted all his strength to the great task of taming men. I believed that he assisted considerably in the ruling of life, as he sat alone in the third floor of a house on the corner of two streets, in a study with windows overlooking the square that spread out below, strewn with the everyday hustle of diminished men squashed to the earth.

Yes, he was a machine working under the steam of Novak, but I was full of admiration for his stern, iron calm. I liked the way he always pronounced the same words in his clear, even voice, always linking up the same thoughts with them.

In my eyes he lost his grip quite suddenly, and I felt it like a sharp blow at the heart. When an informer in the department of State Security killed a minister in Kiev\*, he rushed into my room blue with pallor, his eyes shut, brandishing his unpleasantly shiny hands, stamped his feet and shouted hoarsely and wildly:

"They killed him, damn them . . . ! I wrote, didn't I?—I said to them . . . ! D'you hear? They killed him . . . that's what they're like . . . ! Security, indeed! To the gallows, all of them!"

The sensation of fear was one with which I was only too familiar, and I immediately realised that this frenzy was caused by fear. He rushed into his study and banged the door so violently that the map of Russia in my room fell off the wall. Later on he left the house, forgetting his cane.

Naturally, my feeling for him underwent a change. I could not forget his face, blue with frantic terror, and began to treat him with less unquestioning meekness than before. Once or twice I attempted to improve the style of his verbose letters. He seemed not to notice it. I began to speak to him of everyday topics—this seemed to surprise him. He watched me with his Kalmik eyes and grunted something in reply. When he wrote to tell the Minister his opinions on the necessity for disbanding the Duma, I asked him whether his attention had been drawn to the fact that the new Minister was flirting with the opposition. His ears went purple, and he asked angrily:

"Are you by any chance trying to teach me my business?"

But, returning to his study, he opened the door in a few minutes and from the threshold said to me impressively and softly:

"The Minister's real intentions are well known to me."

I bowed silently.

"I may say, Makaroff, that I am well satisfied with your work. It's becoming more and more comprehensive. Thank you."

\* Assassination of D. Sipiaghin, Minister of Interior, 1902.

I felt that victory was mine and could not help thinking that he had been ashamed of his own burst of temper, afraid that he had hurt me. He began from that day to treat me less like an automaton, having suddenly realised that he was in the presence of a man. Very soon afterwards he even asked me, in the tone with which one usually enquires after people's health:

"Are you married?"

"No."

"That's a good thing," he said. "In our days a wife is a burden for a serious man."

And, after a moment's thought, added:

"We're in battle. Yes, like soldiers in battle. On watch, too . . ."

One morning, shaking hands with me, he asked me in a preoccupied manner what my position was as regards conscription.

"It's quite possible that we shall soon be at war."

I thanked him, amazed and delighted. War was a surgical operation—it could remove the decaying parts from the body of the State. I remarked that if we were victorious in war, we should be victorious against the revolution.

"Certainly," he said, rubbing his hands. "This is what one should think: we shall win. One should believe in it. At the moment, war is undoubtedly favourable for the monarchy."

I then expressed the hope that the politically undesirable elements should be the first to be sent to the front—the students, the workmen, contaminated with propaganda—was that not so?

"That's an idea," he said with a wink, and leant on my table. "That's wise of you. If one made use of the information of the security department, the police, the lists of factory administration . . . ah! . . ."

Then I saw for the first time the way he smiled: his fleshy underlip hung loosely, the moustache stood on end and revealed the line of small, tightly-pressed teeth; he shut his eyes, but the hairy face remained motionless; only the wrinkles on the forehead quivered for a few minutes.

I do not want to speak here of the nightmare of that fiendish war, the greatest and most sinister mistake of the

monarchy. If only we had gone with Germany against Europe, we should have crushed the revolution like a filthy basket of addled eggs and the whole world would have been in our hands, the whole world! No such fatal mistake had ever been made before. It is painful to think of it—thinking about it burns one's soul to ashes. War revealed to me with devastating clarity the sad and probably already organic deformity of the country, where among the multitude of men not one was to be found capable of mastering the chaos, mastering it if necessary at the price of annihilating half a population that can only eat, drink and sleep and produce more similar beings, equally useless, and ready, in the pursuit of this bestial aim, to destroy everything that does not enter into their fathomless, greedy gullets.

Then I watched the revolution grow—the papers of all parties shouted about it, some with despair, others with glee. It sounded victorious even in the words with which the opposition complained of the reaction both in the Duma and in the Press. These complaints were more false than ever and became more and more impudent and obtrusive. The corrosive fog and smoke of the gathering storm was felt everywhere, and I realised that it could not be dispelled any more by my chief's letters to the Governors, ministers and archbishops. "Social organisations" cropped up, obviously venomous unions of town and country—greedy moths nibbling at the ermine mantle of autocracy.

Watching the square from the window of my room, I saw the diminished people different from what they were before. Although just as tiny, and deformed in appearance by the fog, they moved more briskly, more rapidly. In the restaurant where I ate, the boldness of opinion on the life of the State increased, and it was clear that the source of the boldness was the Duma, deteriorating and contaminating the mind of the people with the impudence of stupid criticism. In the evenings I liked to go to the cinema and watch in the dark the silent life of grey shadows, enthralled by their imaginary dangers or unparalleled stupidity, a spectral life that did not compel one to think about it. The cinema has a wonderful effect, sweeping the impressions of real life from one's mind as dust is swept by a mop.



But even there I noticed the intentional penetration of hostile propaganda: they showed towns, better administrated than ours, so that, watching a clean, toy-like town of a small State, Russian people should learn to compare and criticise. Discontent with life was aroused everywhere by every method. and I remembered the words of Colonel Behr: "This could be stopped only by a miracle, perhaps a miracle of cruelty. but a spectacular one."

My chief was not the man to produce a spectacular miracle --no, not he! I realised it more and more clearly. And, feeling disappointed and betrayed, I went to Novak to pour my ideas out to him.

"Yes," he said, standing by the window in the corner of the room, tall and gaunt, "you are right. There is no one. Not a single man. Only theoreticians and critics—but a real man with a will—no!"

The dim panes filled the room with a grey-green twilight, and in it Novak seemed still more disembodied. His face was more deathlike than usual, the voice sounded gloomy. He could say nothing to reassure me, I left him in a state of great depression and out in the street was overcome by a spasm of sharp, almost insane cruelty. I shook with rage, I wanted to shout to the passers-by, as one shouts to dogs: "Down!"

Later on, I sat for a long time on the circular granite bench by the Neva and thought that had I the power, I would know what to do with the people. They all lived in fear of poverty, hunger, extermination, death, and the rest was attributed, yes attributed, to them by inventors of "ideas" only in order to console and thus deceive them, so that they should not go insane, become bestial in their fear and stop working for mankind, as they came to realise how meaningless and terrible their lives were.

It was probably on that night that thoughts were born in my mind, unfamiliar to me until then. I realised that, in fact, man, the individual, was also a coward, whoever he was. Perhaps he was not afraid of the same things that the people were afraid of, but he was afraid of the people. There were so many of them and they were all alien to him. The fear of the people gives to man the right to be mercilessly cruel

to them, a right which is indubitable because the root of it is the instinct of self-defence. Ivan the Terrible was certainly a coward, like all so-called tyrants. The policy of cowards is always the policy of cruelty, all politicians are merciless. This is legitimate, it cannot be otherwise. Only he who is always conscious of the danger of life and knows well what fear is, is able to act with resolution. Perhaps the heroism of "heroes" is merely the extreme expression of man's despair. Almost certainly, heroism is a desperate feat of a man afraid.

Yes, if I had possessed power, I would have left a terrifying, dazzling memory of myself in the world, I would have eclipsed the glory of all the world's tyrants, I would have washed and ironed out people like handkerchiefs.

It seems to me that precisely on that evening, life began to change rapidly, acquiring a more and more riotous character. Something ironical appeared on the flat and, in their essence, appallingly uniform faces of people, something criminal and definitely expectant. Expecting what? What were the fascinating visions that arose in their lazy brains? Perhaps they dreamed of becoming strong, fearless and able to take a step out of the accepted path? Perhaps they were waiting for the man who would show how to take that step, waiting for the leader who would impress them with his power and make them follow him?

Then came months when I was convinced that my chief would acquire this power over the people. This certitude he shared. He pulled himself together, grew thinner, rubbed his hands more often and more strongly, and an uncanny little blue light flared up in his Kalmik eyes. I saw more frequently the gay and hungry gleam of his bared teeth. At nights I would think of what was awaiting me and felt quivering and growing in my heart the strength of despair, the strength of fear, which makes heroes and rules the lives of millions. If what I had expected had happened, I swear the people would have been faced with a truly terrifying individual.

But something different took place. The houses of the town vomited into the streets all their inhabitants, an irritated dark mass of hungry, greedy, live flesh poured into the square. First came the red patches of flags, a few shots, and then more and more flags; it all reminded me of a butcher's shop. Then, with

a devious stoop, Novak rushed suddenly into my room and the words spluttering in his mouth, he hissed, grunted and groaned as he pushed me into the chief's study.

"What are you doing sitting there? Tear up, burn! Have you gone mad? There's a revolution. . . . He's arrested. . . . Where are my letters? Tear them . . . ! Ugh!—ugh!—tear them . . . ! Into the fire . . . !"

He sank into the chair by the stove, took off his spectacles and, wiping them on his knees, moaned:

"Why don't you move? Tear up, destroy, burn . . . !"

I saw his eyes for the first time: they were small, colourless, without lashes, and inflamed, hidden in small red pockets probably filled with pus. I examined them at length, very fixedly, then took him by the collar and lifted him from the chair.

"Scoundrel!" I whispered into his eyes; my legs trembled, and I heard the cutting whistle of the winter storm in my heart—piercing and wicked.

"Scoundrel!" I repeated, shaking my teacher. "Tutor of heroes, eh? You wretch! Where are your heroes?"

He wriggled, scratched my hands with his crooked fingers and growled:

"Don't you dare—I'm not to blame . . . you revolutionary, don't dare . . . you traitor . . ."

"Scoundrel!" I repeated, by now with a delight which I had not known until that moment. "I was afraid of you, I believed in you, believed you to be strong and terrible. Who should I believe in now? Who should I fear? You have killed fear in me, you've killed the man in me, you wretch!"

And, pushing him aside, I left him.

I spent about a year in prison. There I met a group of gangsters. This helped me to get free and provided me with the job of informer for criminal investigation. I've killed a few people—it is a simple matter. Now I am a gangster myself. I may become a hangman. It's all one and the same thing.

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# A SKY-BLUE LIFE



## *A Sky-Blue Life*

**K**ONSTANTIN MIRONOFF sat at his window staring into the street and trying not to think. The wind had swept the sky, dispersing the smoky clumps of clouds; then it arranged the dust along the unpaved road in intricate designs, and finally died down as though burying itself in it. Sparrows, jumping like small bouncing balls, noisily gathered round a chicken's head and started busily plucking at the feathers. A one-eyed black cat crawled from under Rosanoff's gate, watched the birds intently with her only eye, took aim at one of them but missed it, patted the chicken's head with her soft paw, picked it up between her teeth, gave it a little shake and then, sedately raising her tail, unhurriedly carried her booty off under the gate.

The venerable Ivan Ivanovich Rosanoff came stepping firmly along, driving a fawn-coloured goat before him with a stick. The church bells had just begun to ring. The man lifted his cap, revealing the bald skull of one of God's saints, and glanced up with approval into the cool azure sky, while the goat, also stopping, shook its beard and planted its hoofs deep in the dust.

"All this," mused Mironoff, "would be quite impossible in Paris. One isn't allowed to drive goats through the streets of Paris. And people don't chuck chicken's heads out of their windows."

In the distance below, beyond the leaden strip of the river, behind the rust-coloured mass of the distillery buildings and the grey patches of houses occupied by the local colony of lunatics, a swollen, orange, rayless sun was sinking over the sandy hills, among the shaggy black junipers, as though, after having had a good shave, it had slipped away from the asylum and was now going into hiding. The same phenomenon repeated itself day in and day out and had become as tire-

some as the page of a book repeatedly read and firmly imprinted in the memory.

To stop himself from thinking, Mironoff traced the black circles of a railway map on to the pearl-tinted sky; there was Moscow, Riga, Berlin, Cologne, Paris . . . That evening the sky was too crowded, there was so little room that the last of the circles had to be placed too near the sun, or too much in the centre, so that it became annoyingly indistinct. As this was the circle of Paris, it was essential that it should be seen, for once it fell into position he knew his vision would rise up unfailingly before him: a sky-blue city filled with solemn organ music, a city of happy people and wonderful adventures, where life was easy and simple, where nothing disturbingly puzzling was concealed, and where even a villain like Rocambole found it impossible to be wicked all his life. In Paris, the monster Quasimodo himself was inhumanly fascinating. The Three Musketeers had lived there, also the mysterious Knight of the Hen-House, and the fearless d'Arville, one of the three favourites of Anne of Austria. While here . . .

Down on the river bank, two voices were singing a wistful farewell to the sun, which merged well with the brassy clang of the church bells; the deep bass of Artamon, the carter, softened by the distance, droned as richly as the brass of the bells. All day long, since early morning, the dry whistling wind had driven the dust in circling eddies; now the song and the bells filled the air with a flow of gentle sounds, as if striving to establish at long last a soft, musical orderliness in the life of men.

And yet the tuneful quiet of the Saturday evening failed to appease Mironoff. He was entangled, perplexed, torn asunder. His memory, suggesting unwanted pictures of the past, oppressed him with the sense of the motley chaos of life. It was the first time he had felt such an inner disturbance and such a compulsion to think. He *had* to think, and the effort filled him with a strange fear. He inspected every corner of the room several times, as though he expected to find in the bluish dusk what it was that urged and compelled him to meditate and remember.

Strange: when he closed his eyes, the darkness trembled

and whirlwinds danced in it, arranging themselves now horizontally like circles on the water, now forming themselves into slender pillars of black dust, turning this intimate darkness into something silently effervescent; but thoughts oozed out of it like sweat and acquired the dreary shape of insidious words: "How shall I go on living?"

When his father, speaking of meat, fish or milk, used to say that they were "lost in thought," it meant that the meat and fish were putrid, the milk sour. Not long before his father's death, his mother had said to her husband:

"You ought to do a bit of thinking, you fool. You haven't long to live!"

The man had replied with a smile:

"Do you know what thinking means? It means wiping away the dust. Look, you have a dusting rag in your hand. It was clean once, and now it's dirty. Both you and I, Lydia, have done quite enough thinking, and . . ."

His mother, who kept the house scrupulously clean, got very angry at this, and began to scream:

"So I'm a dirty rag, am I? My house is dirty, is it?"

Thirteen dragging days had passed since that morning when Mironoff had gone to the kitchen to have a wash and had discovered his mother's large body on the floor with one shoulder against the stove. Propping herself precariously on one arm, she emitted low groans and stared into the corner with wide-open eyes. Thinking she was still drunk, Mironoff stooped to assist her, but she tore her hand away from the floor, brandished it in the air, and fell heavily at his feet, snorting like a horse. For four days she moaned and snorted and kept waving her arm as though warding off something, and on the fifth she fell out of bed, crept into a far corner of the room towards the chest, and there, with a loud croak, she died.

For a whole week, strange persons fussed about the place from morning till night; the touchy, hunchbacked nurse whisked from room to room, the fat doctor shouted and smoked incessantly, the yellow-bearded, purple-robed priest, Boris, sat with his legs outstretched. They all questioned Mironoff. Kallistrat, the carpenter, who was disliked by the whole street, kept nagging him:



"Now what are you going to do, you miserable orphan?"

In Paris, dying, and all the things that follow it, are far simpler matters: more understandable and even interesting, not so unnecessary, not so dreadful. In Paris, strange people didn't come to gloat over the death of a woman. As for Kallistrat, he would have been simply impossible in Paris.

The day Mironoff's mother was buried, the carpenter took out a pot of sour cream into the street and, dipping a brush into it, began to paint his garden fence. Why? He was not drunk. He went through this absurd performance with the utmost gravity. When someone inquired what he thought he was doing, he calmly replied:

"I am painting the fence."

"With sour cream?"

"I couldn't find any paint."

And for ten minutes he worked in silence, conscientiously daubing the grey boards discoloured by the sun. A dozen men and a crowd of youngsters watched him. Then the sedate Ivan Ivanovich Rosanoff came up and gave a kick to the pot, smashing it to pieces.

The doctor, examining the powerful body of Mironoff's mother, had said in a rude and offensive manner:

"If she hadn't boozed so much, she'd have been good for another forty years."

And Mironoff remembered that, though at the time the words had sounded crude, he had made a swift calculation: if she had lived that long, *he* would have been fifty-nine, and she would doubtless have gone on shouting at him all her life: "You fool! Just like your father!" Large-eyed, noisy, half-drunk from the moment she got up, she would have rolled heavily from room to room with a mop, dusting, killing flies, and filling the air with the smell of pickled onions and soaked apples, her favourite food. And she would have abused his father. She always did that, especially on holidays when he hung his topographer's uniform over his gaunt and lanky body and went to town for a game of billiards. He was a master at that game; in fact, in all things—both in word and deed—he was an exceptional man.

His lanky figure, the long but straggly little moustache, the small tuft of hair under the lower lip, rose in his son's memory.

His father used to cough, spitting up pale pink, then red, saliva, and winking with his dark, sparkling eye, told Kostia marvellous tales about the Turks and General Skobelev, the Caucasus, Khiva and Bukhara. These tales conjured up a picture of him as a carefree wanderer over the face of the earth—free as a bird. Under his left eye was a deep red hole. It dragged down the eyelid and the eye seemed to be peeping into the hole. It was, he said, the result of a wound he received in the Turkish campaign. He never quarrelled with his wife, and seldom argued; instead, he drove her to distraction by strange, sarcastic words, which made her bellow at him:

“You shut up, Mitka! God will punish you for your foolishness, you just wait and see!”

“God never punishes stupidity,” he had answered. “God loves fools.”

These words had disturbed the lad, clinging unnoticed to his memory like a fish’s scale to the skin of the hand. One day, when he was mending somebody’s broken violin, his father had taken a short, round, little stick from the instrument.

“This thing,” he said, “is called the soul. In you, too, Lydia, there is a little spindle like this, put into you by the devil.”

“Liar!” she screamed. “My soul comes from God!”

On her Saint’s Day one year, when she returned from church all dressed up and proud, he had presented her with several yards of cashmere for a new dress. Wrapped up in it was a repulsive picture called “The Death of a Sinner”—at the feet of a dying man stood a green devil, sticking out a fiery tongue, his lip curled in a sneer. She had laughed at first, but, thinking about it later, she felt offended and, having drunk a good deal at dinner, she suddenly burst into tears, calling him, “My misery! My cross!” In her rare moments of repose, she called her husband a conjurer because he had made a music box that could play “The Reel,” “Mother Dear,” and the National Anthem. One day, when drunk, she smashed the music box and trampled it to bits under her feet. Kostia had later gathered up the fragments and hidden them in the garret, and had often begged his father to mend the wonderful

combination of metal and wood which his father had endowed with the miraculous power of singing.

"What nonsense! It's only a box. Don't bother me."

And with a sigh as he thoughtfully played with the boy's ear, he added:

"If she would only burst, drink herself to death, I'd be able to do some fine things."

He liked to make delicate, intricate objects, like carved picture frames; he mended violins and accordions, and when he worked he always sang:

"Seven sous, seven sous,

What shall we do with seven sous?"

The best thing his father ever made, and one which Kostia cherished particularly, was a globe. It was a present to him when he had passed his exams for his second year at school. It was an ordinary globe, but its lower half was set in a tin wash-basin on which he had burnt with acid all the outlines of the oceans and hemispheres, continents and islands, skilfully colouring the various parts. He had filled the basin with steel hairpins and soldered on to it a steel comb which encircled the lower part of the globe. When Kostia turned the globe on its axis, it would play a pretty tinkling tune:

"Siskin, Siskin,

Where have you been?"

Even his mother had liked this toy and often twirled the globe, laughing her hoarse, drunken laugh. But the cat had objected to the blue tinkling ball and scampered away with a snort. When he was bored, Kostia used to tease the cat by turning the globe and making it play the funny metallic tune.

Yes, his father had been a cheerful man and loved a joke, but now whenever Kostia remembered his jokes, they failed to amuse him—they even distressed him.

In the year of his death, when his wife had gone on a pilgrimage to a monastery, he had fixed to all the doors of his flat wooden whistles with rubber balls at the ends. Every time a door was opened or closed, there was a piercing whistle. This drove his wife to distraction when she returned.

"Are you making fun of me, you devil?" she shouted, growing purple in the face, slashed her husband across the

face with a dirty wet rag and proceeded to demolish all the whistles. He had walked off jauntily into the garden, lain down on the grass under the lime-tree, chuckled for a while, and fallen into a restless sleep. Mironoff had gone out and sat by his side, and now he recalled how frightened he had felt listening to his father's delirious slumber, how sad watching the thin, grey face of this dear but inscrutable man. In that hour, a sorrowful shadow was cast over his love for his father. A feeling of mistrust was born in him concerning all the gay things his father had told him about his life. He had received at the time one of those ineffaceable impressions that cast the shape of a man's soul. The bees droned heavily in the thick foliage of the flowering lime-tree. The uninterrupted stringy hum, absorbing all other lesser sounds of the sultry summer day, rose in a symphony of serene beauty into the blue emptiness of the sky. The boy had watched the sky for a long while, until his eyes smarted, and finally, discerning a trembling spot in it, a dark, rayless star, he realised that it was a lark. From that day, he found that he had to think in terms of sound: to echo every thought with a song without words.

During the last two weeks, he had been unable to stifle his thoughts by these sounds without images. The speckled dust of memory invaded his brain, the full voice of his father echoed in it as well as the everlasting wrangling of his permanently drunk and irritable mother. Her reproaches and complaints had revealed to him as a boy that she had been married before to her second husband's employer. The first husband had once tried to shoot his successor.

"My misfortune that he missed you!" she would shout at Kostia's father.

Kostia was conscious that something dark and dangerous was hidden in the lives of his parents, something perhaps even criminal. He did not want to know anything about it, he was afraid to think of it, yet the thought persistently disturbed his imagination up to the time when he became interested in books. From these he learned that there were other, more interesting and more soluble mysteries in the world, another, a freer and more festive life. He was shy and awkward and had no friends. Since he was subject to colds, often ailing,

he found ample time to read. That is how the miraculous city of Paris arose in front of him in a blue mist of magic.

His father had died in the spring, pruning apple-trees in the garden. Mironoff remembered his mother's grim mutterings over her husband's body:

"There, Mitka, you see . . . I always told you . . ."

Four years of the sinister and shameful life with the drunken woman had made him more taciturn than ever. He found pleasure in fishing and long lonely walks in the fields and woods, where he listened to the birds, the rustle of grass and leaves and the strange whisper of the wind. What he loved most was to hear the distant strains of the military band on holidays. As it drew near, the sight of the soldiers puffing out their cheeks as they blew their horns and bugles made the music less pleasurable and comforting. Sometimes he would take a French grammar with him, read it over and over, and try to remember the precise words. But his memory did not retain them; they melted away, without taking a coherent shape, and transformed themselves into odd combinations of beautiful sounds, into a wonderful blue music.

It was on Easter Sunday that he became conscious of Lisa Rosanova for the first time. That morning she was wearing a blue dress. She had just come out of church, accompanied by the solemn clangour of bells, and the festive sun blazed generously upon her. Small, slim, and at the same time full-blown like an exotic flower, she was all steeped in blue down to her stockings. Living just across the street, Mironoff had often seen her, but hitherto the girl's thin and flat figure, her bird-like face with its round, staring eyes and ill-tempered (or was it just weary?) bloodless lips, had not appealed to his heart and imagination. He had even considered her as unattractive as himself. He also knew that she was taking evil-smelling goat's milk as a cure.

But, on that Easter morning, he was filled with joyful amazement: how had he failed to notice that Lisa was beautiful? From that day he had made her the companion of his sky-blue, tuneful dream of life. She became the straw in the swirling current of everything fearful and unfathomable. He had not the courage to pick an acquaintance with the girl, but every day on his way home from the office he lingered

as he passed her house, and after dinner he sat by the window looking out to see whether she would walk out into the street. Sometimes she stepped out and tripped lightly off toward the river to join her father at the lumber yard. As she went down the street, she clung close to the hedges as though reserving the right to dart into a gateway and hide. A short plait of dark hair, tied with a sky-blue ribbon, bounced on her narrow little back. This girl, he thought, had at least one thing in common with him: she was afraid of people, she did not like them, and this brought her still closer to him. After he had watched her until she disappeared from view, he turned to the mirror and scrutinised, with a feeling of sad resentment, his dark, motionless eyes separated by a wide nose-bridge; the left eye squinted slightly and appeared to be peeping at the protuberant waxen ear; over his upper lip, shadowed faintly with dark down, drooped an ill-formed yellow nose; his head was covered with a mass of rebellious, wiry, black hair. It seemed that everything about him grew in the wrong direction, spread itself out like the root of a tree planted in barren soil. His arms were too long, his fingers bony, his mouth too large, and the teeth in it so irregular that he preferred not to smile. He did not like to look at the reflection in the glass. He had noticed that, if one looked long enough, dark circles appeared in the eyes and the reflection seemed to fade away—possibly he himself might fade away together with it.

A few days before his mother's death, he had surprised himself by saying:

"Mother, would you ask Lisa's parents to let me marry her?"

He had blushed in embarrassment, ashamed of having needlessly revealed his secret. But that day she had not been drinking and, as usual when sober, had little to say. Pouring cream into her tea, she did not even glance at him, just called him a fool. And a few minutes later, wiping the sweat from her purple face, she added with a sigh:

"A fine husband you would make!"

Then, clenching her swollen fingers into a large red fist, she brandished it in the air:

"A husband should be like *that!*"

It was painful to remember his mother. The more he thought of her the stranger and more terrifying did she seem, that coarse woman overpowered by fat, with her ill-shapen body and large, opaque eyes; it seemed to him that he was wiping the dust from her and that she became, because of that, even more terrifying and mysterious.

Mironoff shook his head and looked around. The blue dusk in the room had thickened, become warmer. Beyond the river, the evening star shone brightly in the rose-tinted sky. A cart rumbled along the street, loaded with furniture, mattresses, flower-pots; under an artificial palm, a girl reclined on grey bundles. She was dressed in a red blouse, a white shawl tied round her head. She was holding on her knees a cage with a black bird in it—a woodpecker, probably. A few gaily-coloured toy-bricks fell from the cart and rolled into the dust. An old man, his head tilted upward, flourishing the reins, trod by the side of the heavy thick-legged horse and shouted to the girl in a husky voice:

"Who do we go to? Where shall we make our complaint?"

"The old fool!" thought Mironoff contemptuously.

Artamon, the carter from the lumber yard, thick-set and heavy as a bear, came down the street. His shaggy, eyeless face was disfigured by a hare-lip, his mouth formed a triangle, disgustingly revealing a set of broad, fierce, yellow teeth. Walking lightly by his side was the tall and slender carpenter, Kallistrat, bare-footed, wearing an apron smeared with paint and glue, a dark leather band round his fair curly hair. His golden whiskers glimmered under his hawk-like nose. Twisting the strands of his pointed, brass-coloured beard round his fingers, he brightly murmured, glancing sideways at Mironoff:

"Dullard . . ."

"Never mind, let him be . . ." the carter grunted in his rasping voice.

They walked on slowly, lazily shuffling the dust with their feet; it rose behind them in a reddish cloud. The street was filled with admiration at the superhuman physique of the carter and feared him as they feared the strange impudence of the carpenter.

Mironoff closed his eyes tight. It seemed to him that if a man's eyes were shut, it made him invisible to others.

The days rolled on, rapidly jumping over the ditches of the nights; the nights were hot, sleepless, and when Mironoff dozed off for a while, he dreamed strange dreams. On a broad road illuminated by bonfires stretched an interminable file of marching brass coffee-pots, all the same size, with long legs and looking rather like spiders. A small hunchbacked monster paved the street, driving nails into the earth so close to one another that the road seemed covered with an iron scale. A huge fish swam along the river swallowing the reflection of the moon which sauntered along and swayed to and fro like a pendulum in the weirdly black sky. These dreams troubled him with all their absurdity. He lived now, rid of the heavy steps of his mother, her shrill, hoarse cries; the smell of alcohol, soaked apples and pickled onions had disappeared from the rooms; the dry old cook, Pavlovna, moved noiselessly and silently like a cat, only sighing from time to time with a hissing sound. But even in this silence, his life was uneasy. He felt that everything about him—the photographs, the ikons—were silently but sternly asking:

“Well, what are you going to do next?”

He noticed that the people in the street looked at him in precisely the same demanding way as if expecting something of him; their clinging glances filled him with despondency.

On Sunday, after sunset, he was sitting on the side of a barge, still half submerged by the action of the winter ice, fishing for perch. In the distance he could hear the brass trumpets of the military band. The slow ripple of the blue water and the strains of music blissfully drove away all thought, the warm waves of sound lifted him aloft, gently, soothingly. To his keen senses, the river hummed a bass that almost drowned all other sounds. But not altogether—the ear could see them as through a dim pane. He did not notice a boat draw up alongside.

“Are they biting?”

He started, and drew his line out of the water. A fat perch wriggled on the hook.

“See! I’ve brought you luck! Got many?”

“Three—with this.”

The newcomer was Lisa Rosanova, clad in a mauve-coloured dress, her hair tied with a bow of sky-blue silk. She



was sitting at the stern of the little boat while her friend, Clavdia, a fat, black-haired girl in a pink blouse and dark blue skirt, was at the oars. Clavdia lazily manœuvred these in order to prevent the boat from floating with the current. Lisa smiled. Mironoff tried to smile back at her but, remembering his teeth, pressed his lips tight together.

"Let's go on!" said Lisa after a moment, and Clavdia, dropping the oars deep into the water and throwing herself backwards, pulled away. One oar jerked and some water splashed Mironoff's shoes.

"Oh, excuse me!"

Lisa broke into a light tinkling laugh, while Mironoff dangled his wet feet in embarrassment.

"Stupid of me," he thought to himself, as he shook the water from his clothes. "Anyone else would have been glad of this chance to talk with her, but I . . . Maybe they even splashed me on purpose in order to strike up an acquaintance?"

Meanwhile, the boat floated downstream with the current, the rowlock screeching in mockery. Mironoff shook himself, emptied his pail of water and fish, took up his rod and went home. All the way back he pitied himself. He walked heavily, looking under his feet.

As he approached his house, he noticed that the brown paint on the front and the gate and the green paint on the shutters was fading and peeling off here and there.

"That must be painted," he decided.

Early in the morning of the following Wednesday, a bald little fellow, with an aggressive and sarcastic manner, and his assistant, a snub-nosed youngster smeared in paint, got busy scraping the house with an iron scraper. The old man sang softly as he worked:

"He went away without saying good-bye . . ."

The boy chimed in with his shrill treble:

"And gave his love to another . . ."

Mironoff, aroused from sleep by the grinding of the steel and the song, lay in his warm bed and thought:

"How silly! The old fellow's too old to sing about love, and the other is too young. Why the deuce do house-painters always sing when they work?"

A few days later, the painter was instructed to tint in sky-blue the façade of the house, which looked as though it was suffering from the effects of small-pox, and when the venerable Ivan Ivanovich Rosanoff came by he stopped in the middle of the street, like a monument, and exclaimed in a stern voice:

"What are you doing over there?"

"I'm doing what I'm ordered to do," replied the other rudely.

"But why blue?"

"I've been told to paint it blue."

"It disfigures the whole street."

"What's it to me?"

"Stupid!"

"I'm not the stupid one."

Mironoff, who was watering the flowers on his window-sill, overheard this conversation and was disturbed and deeply hurt. Why was a sky-blue house disfiguring and stupid?

"There seems little chance now of him letting me have his daughter," he thought.

He quickly came out into the street, looked at the other houses with fronts washed out and faded by the rain and sun, and saw grey fences joining one with the other. White willows, with dusty foliage, descended straight to the river in two long lines, like beggars, seven on one side, ten on the other. Among the seven stood the one-storied brick house belonging to Rosanoff, its four windows peering grimly into the street. The triangle under the gable of his own house was already painted, as though covered with a layer of soft silk. It shone with an oily lustre and caressed the eye with its quiet bluish colour. There stood Rosanoff and, solemnly touching his cap with one forefinger, he turned to Mironoff, saying:

"It's unpractical, that colour."

"But it's beautiful."

"And expensive."

"But it wears well."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"The painter says so."

"All painters are liars," said Rosanoff sternly, and turned away, solid and upright, offering to the sun his earnest coun-

tenance and silvery beard. Mironoff had no time to ask why all painters were liars. He went indoors, took a book from the shelf and sat down by the window. Rosanoff reappeared an instant later with a broom and began sweeping the litter from under his windows into the middle of the street. The painter shouted:

"Hey! What are you raising all that dust for? You'll spoil the paint."

Without deigning to reply, Rosanoff went on sweeping. Mironoff knew well enough that it was done on purpose, maliciously. And he was hurt. He got up, went into his garden and sat down under an aged apple-tree.

"No, he won't let me marry his daughter. Why did I have the house painted, anyway?"

He could still hear the painter and Rosanoff arguing. He knew he ought to go and put an end to it, but he felt paralysed by grey and dreary thoughts of people always strangely getting in each other's way. He remained in the garden till supper time.

The night was stifling and silent, and he could not sleep. The moon was irritatingly bright and the dogs kept up an incessant din. On the floor near his bed was a golden yellow square of light over which the window bars cast sharp shadows. Suddenly, three other lines moved across the spot and then came the outline of a man. It was as though a lamplighter had glided past in the sky, carrying a ladder on one shoulder. Mironoff heard a rustling sound, then the creak of wood. He pushed back his blanket, sat, and watched the window. There was a ladder immediately outside. Evidently the painter had forgotten to take it down and someone was trying to steal it. Mironoff jumped out of bed, approached the window, and looked up: on top of the ladder was a man—he could see his bare feet. He crept noiselessly out of the window into the street. There, brightly lit up by the moon, stood a man on top of the ladder, dipping a short brush into a paint pot that hung from his belt, hurriedly daubing at the wall round the attic window.

"Who's that?" said Mironoff in an undertone.

With uncanny swiftness, the man slid down the ladder, paint spilling from the pot and streaming down the walls. A

strong smell of tar permeated the air. Snatching up his ladder, the man tried to run away, but Mironoff had already recognised him. It was Kallistrat. Moving back to the middle of the street, Mironoff saw in the silvery dust of the moonlight faint but large letters over the attic window proclaiming, "THE HOUSE." Dark streams of tar softly trickled down from every letter, and occasionally he could hear a heavy thud as a large drop struck the ground below. The carpenter, holding his ladder on one shoulder, stood some distance away, by the gate of his house; one could distinguish clearly his small beard and a black band on the fair hair of his forehead.

"Look here," began Mironoff. "What did you do that for?"

The other was silent and did not move.

"How strange! One day you mess around with sour cream, then with tar."

Kallistrat laughed. To Mironoff it seemed that there was something sinister in that laugh; it sounded like a cross between the cackling of a hen and the bark of a puppy. It was evil; it made everything more incomprehensible and insulting. The whole thing was like a bad dream. The dull window-panes shone like ice, the air was so hot that it seemed to emanate light.

"You'd better not try to fight," suddenly said the carpenter, "or I'll give you a proper hiding."

"I have no intention of fighting," said Mironoff, moving towards his gate.

Kallistrat, laying the ladder down against the fence, followed him at a distance.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked.

There was a new and at the same time familiar note in his clear voice. Mironoff's father used to speak like that, combining tenderness and reproof.

"No, I'm not angry, but . . . why ruin things like that?"

The carpenter now stood at his side and struck him on the shoulder. His hand was as light as a bird's wing.

"Don't be offended, Mironoff, I'll make it right for you. The tar won't stick to oil, anyway. That's why it runs so. I didn't do it right. I ought to have mixed soot with paraffin, then . . ."

"But why?"

"For fun, don't you see? It was a queer idea, your painting your house blue. No one does that."

The carpenter bit his lower lip, jerked his head upwards and, half closing his eyes, looked enquiringly at the sky as though trying to think something out. Then he pulled out a wooden cigarette case from his pocket, struck a match, lit his cigarette and threw up the match so cleverly that it continued to burn, drawing a trembling, fiery line in the air. With one hand on Mironoff's shoulder, he forced him down on the bench beside the gate and, sitting down by his side, addressed him in a patronising and slightly mocking manner:

"Of course, I understand what you're after: you want to seem different from other people. You think that because you're free and an orphan, you can do as you like, don't you? Do all sorts of queer things? But I advise you to stop, Mironoff. There are only two of us who can play that game, I and the Devil. You are still a nought so far as our God's concerned . . ."

"What God?" enquired Mironoff sullenly.

"Same old God, my boy. Don't be a bore. There's only one. Have you forgotten? See here, now: your mother was dying—a human being, let's say. All the neighbours were interested. They came buzzing about. Well, all I had to do was to start painting the fence with sour cream and they all hustled over to watch me. See?"

"No, I see nothing. It all sounds like rubbish to me," Mironoff said, shaking his head in a puzzled way.

"Well, you're no good if you can't see it. And yet you want to push forward. Let me tell you, you poor kid, rubbish has to be understood as well as anything else. Now, can you think up something like that sour cream of mine? There—you see! Now, I've been tested, I've even been tried for my pranks. Why, I once poured paraffin into a letter-box and threw in a lighted match. All the letters were burned and no one could find out the reason. It got into the papers. People wondered: why do the letters burn? Was it because of the glowing feelings expressed in them—and perhaps one should write with more restraint? All foolishness, of course, youthful high spirits. Why, I used to lie awake at nights

thinking what I could do that was different. Even now, I like to mystify people. It's so funny to see them lose their footing when everything looks simple around them and then, all of a sudden, something queer happens."

The carpenter twirled the ends of his moustache, passed the tip of his tongue over his lips, half-closed the right eye, and, looking up at the moon, with the left, said with a sigh:

"A beauteous luminary, but dogs don't care for it."

Watching stealthily his sharp, changeable face, and listening to every word he said, Mironoff wanted to do two things: to go on asking him questions, or to say something insulting and leave him at once. But what he actually said was:

"Maybe the dogs imagine it's a fox?"

"No one knows what dogs imagine," replied the carpenter with a grim smile, and went on talking as though preaching a sermon, reproaching and warning at the same time, but becoming more and more incomprehensible. His boasting oppressed Mironoff, the words he uttered had something in common with those he read in the French grammar, familiar in a way, but their meaning dark and elusive. The moonlight seemed to melt the darkness in the thick foliage of the willows, made the leaves shine like silver and touched the carpenter's curly head with gold, showing up the black leather band on the forehead. His green eyes were wonderful, mocking and sly, their sharp gleam gave one the sensation of being pricked with a needle. One could not trust a man with such eyes. He was obviously making fun of Mironoff; his clear voice had a false ring in it.

"I think you're a lunatic!"

The words came from Mironoff in spite of himself, and surprised him.

"Am I?" asked the carpenter, laughing.

"What was it you were writing up there on the house?"

"I'd just begun when you interrupted me. What I wanted to write was 'The House of a Lunatic'—the street would have roared with laughter in the morning. See here, Mironoff," he continued, in a serious businesslike manner, tapping the other on the knee, "suppose you let me have ten roubles?"

Mironoff drew away outraged.

"Now wait, don't be offended. I have a wonderful idea. I've taken a liking to you. The way you behaved just now: anyone else would have kicked up a hell of a row, whereas you did nothing. That, my boy . . . Well, anyway, I want to do something in return. Having failed in making fun of you, I want to do you a good turn. See?"

He spoke softly this time, with no mockery in his eyes, though Mironoff was now quite convinced that he was mad. That would account for his mischievous ways. He smiled to himself, for this notion comforted him, providing a solution for his puzzled mind and, looking into the sky, he listened to the soft words of Kallistrat.

"I'll buy some paint and paint your house so that the whole town will gasp. I've been longing to do something that would make it gasp."

"But why?"

The carpenter didn't seem to have heard, and continued twirling his brass-coloured beard round his fingers and pulling it.

"I tell you, there's nothing I don't know how to do, but I hate working. That's because I can't get work to my taste. No one seems to share that taste. Now *you* . . ."

"Very well," agreed Mironoff, for he realised that Kallistrat would be up to some other prank if he refused him his way in this. He could see that the promise of money amazed the carpenter; drawing away, he measured Mironoff with a fiery glance. Then, fumbling with the leather band on his head, he murmured:

"Well! That's—well, you won't regret it. I'll return in the morning."

He turned and walked briskly away, then, stopping as though he had stumbled, exclaimed to himself, stretching his arm in the air:

"It'll be something! A real work of art . . . How they'll gasp!"

Mironoff could see his black silhouette clearly outlined against the blue silver of the river. Then he suddenly disappeared. Mironoff stepped out into the middle of the street again, glanced up at the shutter smeared in reddish mud and

read the words: "THE HOUSE"; then, his head dropping wearily, went indoors to bed, thinking to himself:

"Yes, a lunatic, and probably a rascal into the bargain."

Early in the morning, the cook came to say that the carpenter had arrived and wanted money. So it had not been a dream. He gave the old woman the ten roubles and sank back into bed again. Ought he not to bring an action against the fellow?

This was not a bad idea: it came back to him as he left the house on his way to the office and noticed the greasy black smudges on the light walls. The tar had run down to the ground in places, so that the word "HOUSE" was hardly decipherable. He walked quickly down the street, uncomfortably conscious of the mocking smiles of passers-by. Lisa, too, was doubtless laughing . . . There are no wooden houses in Paris, he thought . . .

When he returned at five in the afternoon, he saw from a distance a group of youngsters by his gate, and a ladder propped against the front of the house. From the top of it hung a bright tin can. With one leg inside the attic window, the carpenter swayed to and fro. Shaking his cane, Mironoff quickened his pace and shouted at Kallistrat:

"See here! What the devil! I forbid you . . ."

The youngsters, who had greeted him at first with shrieks of excitement, became silent and drew away towards the fence. Mironoff was quivering with anger as he looked up at Kallistrat's dry face and wide-open wicked eyes, and felt ashamed to feel that he was ready to burst into tears. The carpenter slid down the ladder with uncanny agility, pushed Mironoff with his shoulder and pointed up with his brush.

"What are you shouting for? Don't you like it, eh?"

The frame of the attic window had been removed and the semi-circular hole stood out sharply on a blue triangle. On one side of it was a huge monster painted yellow and white, with red fins, but without a tail; the large protruding red eyes were surrounded with white circles. The thing was peering into the gaping window. Its snout was a cross between that of a fish and a sheep.

"There will be three of them," explained the carpenter in a whisper, stamping with one foot. "One opposite and



another on top. The window will be painted to look like a fish-trap and it will seem as though they were crawling into it."

His hand trembled. He seemed drunk, but Mironoff smelt no alcohol on his breath. Maybe the smell of paint was too strong? Kallistrat was smeared from head to toe, even on his cheek there was a red patch like a comma. His green eyes burned with a strange light.

"Well," he asked, "isn't it lovely?"

The youngsters had begun to jeer again behind Mironoff's back. A beggar walked up to him, made a deep bow, started an incantation and extended an iron-black hand. A shaggy dog was with him, its tongue hanging out and its head on one side, critically regarding the scene, as though it were also perplexed by the brilliant fresco above. Rosanoff's stern voice came through the din:

"Is this going to be a peep-show?"

Mironoff turned quickly round as Rosanoff continued with indignation:

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, young man. You must put an end to this indecent behaviour!"

As always, when he did not understand something, Mironoff felt helpless and numb. The sudden burst of irritation had subsided. Rosanoff's rebuke had had a far deeper effect. He turned to Kallistrat and said in a low plaintive voice:

"Did you hear that?"

The carpenter showed his contempt by a gesture as he answered, his voice ringing with clear conviction:

"Everyone has a right to paint his house as he likes," and turned again towards the ladder. Mironoff held him back.

"Please don't go on with it. People will laugh."

"I'll see they don't laugh at me," the carpenter said, and there was in him a terrifying exultation.

"But, after all, this is *my* house," Mironoff reminded him.

"Then tell them to go to the devil!" said the carpenter, now half-way up the ladder. "Oh, they'll gasp, you just see!"

Overwhelmed with physical weariness, shame and impatience, Mironoff went indoors, determined to lodge a complaint with the police on the carpenter's arbitrary behaviour. He sat down at his table, too tired to take off his clothes,

trying to think, his eyes half shut, and began to write. But the ink was thick, the pen leaked, and he found himself writing "dement" instead of "detriment." He threw away the pen and got up with the intention of going over to see Rosanoff and ask his advice. He put on his Sunday clothes, brushed his hair with a wet brush, left the house cautiously in order to avoid Kallistrat, and crossed the street. But as he looked from Rosanoff's front yard through the gap in the hedge, he realised that his caution had been unnecessary: standing bolt upright on the ladder, the carpenter was stretching out his arm at an unnatural angle and covering up the sheep's head of the fish with blue paint. Mironoff seemed to hear him growling.

"He's only ruining the outside today," thought Mironoff, "but tomorrow he may set fire to it. What am I to do?"

"Well, what do you want?" asked Rosanoff in an unfriendly manner as he stood on his porch smoothing his shaggy eyebrows. Taking off his cap, speaking almost in a whisper, Mironoff hurriedly explained what he had come for. He found it humiliating and awkward to stand on the steps below Rosanoff. A ray from the setting sun shone directly into his eyes and dazzled him, making him shift uneasily from one foot to the other. He frowned and gesticulated. To make matters worse, his new suspenders squeaked. Rosanoff looked at him like a priest from his pulpit preparing to begin his sermon. "Is there something wrong about my appearance?" Mironoff wondered. "Why am I not asked to come indoors?"

"I hardly see the purpose," began Rosanoff scornfully, peering with his round cats' eyes over Mironoff's head, "of your association with that rascal. If he lived in the country, they would have sent him to Siberia long ago. Here in town, justice slumbers. People are allowed to disfigure life as they like."

Through the window, among the flowers, Mironoff saw a familiar dark eye. This watching eye roused in him the desire to say something important, striking, so he blurted out excitedly:

"I think he's mad."

"Well, it's your own affair. Go on thinking it. I will keep silent."

This was most embarrassing. With a deep bow to Rosanoff's back that made the suspenders squeak worse than ever, he stole another glance at the window. Was it possible that Lisa had heard the squeak? But the eye had disappeared. . . . How silly it all was, he thought, as, annoyed and depressed, he came out again into the street. Kallistrat had climbed down the ladder and stood holding his yellow beard, looking up at his work. When Mironoff came up to him:

"No good," he stated, with a sigh. "It's all wrong."

"All wrong!" echoed Mironoff.

"Too bad!" He swore under his breath and went on to complain with obvious resentment. "And I had such a wonderful idea. That fish was my undoing. I tried to do my best—as you are fond of fishing. I should have stuck to flowers. I'm very good at that. Hares, too . . ."

With a vague hope in his heart, Mironoff took Kallistrat by the arm and led him to the gate.

"Look here," he said.

"What am I to look at? I'm ashamed of myself, Mironoff. Don't you understand?"

"I think I do."

"No, you can't . . . Have you got some vodka? Come on, give me some. I promise to paint it all over again for you, of course. Don't you worry!"

The faint hope vanished. He called gruffly to Pavlovna through the kitchen window to bring vodka, and sat down on the bench, the carpenter squatting on a step below, his elbows resting on his knees, his fingers stuck in the great shock of hair. The black band had come down to the brows and accentuated their golden tint. The cook brought out a bottle of mountain-ash vodka and a piece of meat-pie.

"Tell me, Mironoff," said Kallistrat, "how is that possible? Here I've spent your money, wanted to make a laughing-stock of you, and yet you are decent to me. You give me food and drink. . . . It can't be true."

"I don't know," said Mironoff vaguely. He was busy thinking how he could discourage Kallistrat from going on with the work.

The carpenter gulped down two glasses of vodka and continued, lowering his voice to a whisper:

"Well, I'm telling you—it can't be true. People are like spiders to one another. Either spiders or fools. A kind man is always a bit of a fool."

This annoyed Mironoff. He wanted to answer sharply, but could think of nothing else to say but what his father had once said with a challenge:

"God loves fools."

"You're right, you poor orphan. God is not without craftiness, that's true. I've thought it all out. I know. You can trust me. You don't know what fish you've caught on your line. I'll be your friend for life. Why, you have caused my soul to blush for shame. It's your meekness that's done it. . . ."

His greenish-grey eyes grew moist and he became ecstatic, like earlier in the day. He pressed his fingers into the corners of his eyes, forcing out the tears. Though merely bored at first by the carpenter's expostulations, Mironoff could not help being impressed by these hard, strange tears. Wiping his fingers, which were wet with vodka, on a handkerchief, he watched the curiously blinking eyes, the trembling brass-coloured whiskers; he saw beads of perspiration stand out on the carpenter's forehead, and, hardly realising what he was doing, he wiped the man's white sweating temples with his handkerchief. It was now Kallistrat's turn to be impressed. For a moment he looked at Mironoff, speechless; then, with a smile, he said:

"Why did you do that?"

"Perspiration."

The carpenter chuckled softly, shaking, and stamping his feet as he spluttered between fits of laughter:

"Am I a baby that needs to have its little face wiped?"

"Well, I just couldn't help doing it."

"No, you're a . . . Well, never mind. I'll paint it over in the morning, don't worry."

"I beg of you, don't do that."

"What?"

"No, no, don't!"

The carpenter heaved a sigh, looking downwards, rose and offered his hand.

"Forgive me," he said, and sauntered away, suddenly limping—one of his legs had probably gone numb. He stopped

at the gate, peered back into the yard, thickly overgrown with weeds, and finally walked off, slamming the gate behind him. Mironoff remained sitting motionless, feeling washed out and wishing only one thing—to forget. Though the problem of the painting of the house had been so satisfactorily settled, he was not happy.

“What an impossible man!” was the lazy thought that came to him.

Late in the evening, when darkness fell on the trees and the birds were asleep in their nests, Mironoff came out into the garden and lay in the grass under the apple-trees, looking at the sky through a dusty network of leaves. Why was it that this stifling heaviness should come to the earth from the icy blue chalice of the heavens? The pale crescent moon faded away over the apple-trees. The voices of men, weary with the day's labour and the heat, floated lazily in the dusty air; they annoyed him; he liked to sink into unbroken silence, like into water, and for that it was necessary that the silence should be complete; he then felt free, his body had no weight and floated along on the wings of harmonious, infinite thought, devoid of word, shape or image. The sky, the earth, and everything on it, seemed to dissolve and slowly pour away in waves and circles rising into infinite space. He himself seemed to echo every sound, but he was not really there; it was his disembodied self—and the flight. He never knew, never felt anything as marvellous and mysterious as this unthinking, harmonious rising of the earth to the stars and even higher, to the abode of the Supreme and infinitely tender Being, the inextinguishable source of intoxicating music. The idea of God on a golden throne surrounded by Cherubim and Seraphim singing Hosannahs failed to satisfy him. The God Who was worshipped in the temples of men, millions of whom daily invoked His Name for help but Whose power was not noticeable in life, had long ago ceased to be his God. For some time, he had vaguely suspected that this old-fashioned God had forsaken men and a new God, a mocker, a clever scamp very much like the Devil, had taken His place. When he tried to visualise the maker of the music of the world, his mind, still virginal, evoked the image of a nude woman emerging from a blue mist that set him tingling with an eerie,

tremulous desire; his heart beat faster and he felt as though he was rapidly falling to the earth from a great height; the symphony of sound and the sensation of flight ceased abruptly and he then recalled all the young girls and women who had ever entered his life. These experiences were as unpleasant as they were unavoidable; they always aroused painful feelings of shame, fear, helplessness, a sharp curiosity; therefore Mironoff tried not to evoke the woman of the starry heights, an image, the beauty of which hurled him down to earth. On this particular evening he was unable to produce the sensation of flight which had always been so easy. In spite of himself, other ideas crowded upon him, demanding answers. *Had* Lisa heard the screech of his stupid new suspenders? Her father hated his fellow-beings, judging them with severity, directly interfering with their lives. That was why he was universally respected. . . . How was one to live in order to keep others from interfering? The figure of the carpenter rose insistently before him, his strange personality appeared constantly before his eyes, demanding explanations. How stupid! Mironoff closed his eyes in an effort to dismiss troublesome thoughts; he made himself more comfortable and began to recite in an undertone the dialogue from a play he had just been reading:

- “ ‘ Oh, yes, in a way.’  
‘ A bull can be pleasanter than an eagle.’  
‘ Bull? You mean me? ’  
‘ Yes, sir, with your permission.’  
‘ I am insulted.’  
‘ Well, what of it? ’  
‘ I am insulted, I say.’  
‘ It seems to me that Nature has insulted you  
far more cruelly than I have, sir.’  
‘ Nature has made me a nobleman.’  
‘ Then it is the nobility that is insulted.’ ”

“ The yard is choked with weeds! The garden is neglected! ”  
That was the carpenter's clear voice. Kallistrat stood at Mironoff's side, wearing a loose pink shirt open at the collar, and patched underpants. He was barefoot, and by the look of

his hair you would have thought he had just risen from bed; the leather band had slipped down to his ears.

"How in the world did you . . . ?"

"I climbed over the fence. You really must tell Artamoshka to clean up the garden and yard. He likes that kind of work. Let him play around in the evening."

Kneeling before Mironoff, Kallistrat extended a hand to him, saying:

"Here's what's left of the money. I paid six roubles for the paint and the two brushes. I'll give them to you if you like. You may be able to use them."

"I don't want them," said Mironoff with a touch of annoyance.

"Well, neither do I," and the carpenter laid the money on the ground by the apple-tree, sat down by Mironoff's side and looked him in the eyes.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

"About girls, eh?"

"No."

"You must be careful with the girls," he pursued sententiously, picking a dry weed and scratching his forehead. "One of the bold kind would get the upper hand, and with the soft, clinging variety you'd both be under water in no time at all."

"I won't answer him," said Mironoff to himself, rocking to and fro on the grass, "then he'll go."

"I've been thinking a lot about you, Mironoff. You know, you've touched me, penetrated me through and through, disturbed my peace of mind. What was that you were mumbling when I came—a spell?"

"Oh, nothing. Some poetry."

"You surprise me, Mironoff."

"I don't want to surprise anyone."

"But you do."

This was said disapprovingly and almost as a threat. Mironoff sat up, his legs curled up under him. What could one say to such a man? What could one talk to him about?

"It's very hot," he ventured.

"It is. But tell me what you are thinking of?"

"I don't like to think. I like everything to be restful." He tried to appear angry, but realised that his words sounded like an apology.

"You see," he added, "how clear and quiet the sky is, but when the clouds . . ."

He did not complete the sentence, conscious that, though he was speaking in a loud voice, the words had a plaintive sound. The carpenter, stealthily looking up at the sky, remarked:

"The heavens, Mironoff, are empty. That's why it's quiet."

"But what about the sun and moon and stars? Maybe there's something there we don't see?"

The carpenter shook his head dubiously.

"It doesn't look as though you believed in God," he said, "you don't go to church."

These words served to rouse Mironoff's anger; he wanted to say something offensive, but no offensive words came to his mind and he could only mutter sullenly:

"My father did not believe in God."

"Many people allow for that."

"And about ideas, he said that they were like dust, that they served only to cast a veil over everything."

"You don't say! He said that?"

"Yes, and now I can see for myself: thoughts are like worms. You dig them in the ground; they begin to squirm and wriggle . . ."

As he pulled up blades of grass, the carpenter was listening attentively, his head on one side, and his whiskers moved as he smiled.

"When one thinks," Mironoff was saying, "there are really two men in you: one that's wise, and one that mixes everything up. I don't want to think. The soul abhors thought."

"There you are wrong, Mironoff."

"But what is there to know?"

He hoped to impress the carpenter, to frighten him, to offend him—anything to drive him away for good and all.

"There is nothing we don't know: people are born, marry, have children, and die. There are fires, thefts, murders. Circuses, church processions. Somebody's wife elopes. Drunken brawls. Sour cabbage cooking, cucumbers being



pickled. Gambling. My God, what is it all to me? I don't want any of it!"

"Well," asked the carpenter calmly, "what *do* you want?"

His calm seemed to sober down Mironoff. He mumbled:

"Just quiet."

"Then you ought to have been born deaf. It's hard to make you out, Mironoff."

"I don't ask you to make me out."

Was this offensive enough, would it make him go, he wondered, looking stealthily, anxiously, but without hope at the carpenter who moved his hand in the air, watching the shadow that fell on it from the leaves of the apple-tree, and, gliding, came down across the grass and made it dark and velvety. Kallistrat watched this in silence. Mironoff, with a sigh, also extended his hands towards the rays of the moon and the shadows. They both sat like this for some time, hands stretched out into the void like blind beggars. It was the carpenter who first broke the silence, in a clear, brisk voice:

"No, Mironoff, nothing you can say or do surprises me. Words can't, and as for your blue house, why, that only makes me laugh."

"Confound you! Go to the devil! Why are you forcing yourself on me?"

But Kallistrat only smiled, shook his head and winked.

"Temper, eh?"

And he smiled with infinite good-humour, readjusted the leather band on his forehead, lit a pungent cigarette, and slowly puffed the blue smoke into the still air.

"I understand, Mironoff. It's boredom that does it. Your youth is to blame. You're not used to life yet. And your youth demands pleasures. Girls serve for the purpose, but what they have to give to a serious man doesn't endure. Indeed, there are very few reasons for enjoyment."

The dictatorial tone in which this was spoken again aroused Mironoff's anger: such things from an illiterate working-man who read no books, but just talked and talked!

"Everything must be changed, altered!" he said, also dogmatically.

"In politics, you mean?" asked the carpenter, blowing the ash from his cigarette. "No. Political things don't interest

me. I want to create something from my very soul, something perfect, different from anything else, that will make people gasp."

"Why not bite the Governor?" suggested Mironoff crossly.

"What did you say?" asked the carpenter, blinking his eyes.

"Bite the Governor. In church, during the service. Everyone will gasp at that."

"Don't be angry, now," said Kallistrat, striking his knee with his hand and laughing, "you are an interesting chap, I must say. A bit muddle-headed, but interesting. Yes, Mironoff, my friend, everyone in this world is bored, and wants to do something to surprise himself and others, but the trouble is there's nothing to surprise them with. And people don't know how to go about it. Now, you'd better stop trying to think. Your mind's not made that way; you're the silent, dumb type. Go to bed. He who sleeps, wants not."

Poking the butt of his cigarette in the earth, he jumped up swiftly and, without saying good-bye, made his way to the fence, repeating in a tone of mockery:

"He who sleeps, wants not."

Listening to the creaking of the fence under Kallistrat's weight, Mironoff thought to himself with satisfaction:

"He won't come again—he's offended. That was an inspiration, telling him to bite the Governor."

He pictured to himself the vast bald head and protuberant ears of His Excellency, the governor of the district, emerging in church out of a cloud of blue incense, with a mass of other heads behind him. He saw the carpenter steal up cautiously and seize one crimson ear with his small and greedy teeth. The congregation gives one great gasp that makes the candles flicker. The carpenter is seized, dragged away, given a thrashing . . .

Mironoff burst out laughing, but stopped as he heard the fence creaking again. Convinced that it was Kallistrat playing the spy on the other side, he rose and, pretending to cough, slipped into the house without looking back.

Next morning, stepping out into the street, he discovered that the monster by the attic window had been painted over with a heavy coat of blue, but of so dark a shade that the triangle loomed over the windows and pressed the sky-blue

house to the earth. The splotches of tar and red patches on the wall and on the shutters were also all covered over, but again, not in the same clear, silky shade.

"So he has kept his word!" thought Mironoff, looking upwards. He tried to imagine the carpenter "keeping" his word. It must be a hard job, for every word contains the power of evoking similar-sounding words and as they cling together they spread and dissolve into obscure and incoherent images. For instance, a simple word like "peat" suddenly may turn into "peter out"—or "pen" into "penny-wise."

With a shake of the head, he went into dinner. He had scarcely sat down when the gate banged and the carter, Artamon, a scythe and a spade swung over one shoulder, rolled heavily into the yard, stopped by the porch, leaned his implements against the wall, crossed himself, spat on his hands, took up his scythe again with a grunt and, swinging it lightly as if it was a whip, began cutting the grass and weeds. Mironoff rose and, hiding behind the window, looked on.

"They seem to think the place belongs to them!" he mused.

He could clearly discern on the carter's hairy face the fierce-looking teeth glistening in the red hole of the triangular mouth; the crafty bear's eyes, almost invisible under his shaggy eyebrows; the large nose nearly buried in the moustache; and the untidy beard. It seemed unnatural, as though Artamon had practically no face at all. He plodded on with an effort, as though cutting his way through an invisible but almost impenetrable thicket.

"So that's what it is. Kallistrat has created Artamon to make people gasp . . ."

In a few minutes, Artamon had cut all the high grass. He paused in a corner of the yard, held his scythe like a lance, looked up at the sky and crossed himself again, rapping his fingers against his shoulders and his protruding dog-like forehead. Mironoff took him a tea-glass of vodka, a rissole, and a piece of bread, and thanked him.

"Thank you," repeated the carter in an almost inarticulate murmur; he threw back his head, tossed the vodka into the misshapen mouth, poked in half the piece of bread together with the meat, glanced at what was left, and then forced that in after the rest, swallowed it all and sat down.

"Now for the back garden," he said thickly.

"How much are you charging for this?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm doing it for fun." And he trudged off on his short legs, his feet in huge, heavy boots, white with chalk or flour.

Looking into the garden an hour later, Mironoff saw that all the grass had been mown. Artamon was standing under the apple-tree, stroking the branches with his hand. Catching sight of Mironoff, the carter shouted:

"Hey there, you!"

Mironoff went out to him, but stopped in alarm at the angry tone of Artamon's voice.

"You're a fine landlord! See that lichen! And all these caterpillars! These trunks should have been sprayed—that's what the spray is for. These trees ought to have been dug out around the roots long ago; they need manure. You're a fine one, you are! You deserve a hiding!"

The carter growled as he extended one hand, the fingers outstretched, covered with the filthy slime of squashed caterpillars. Mironoff shuddered with disgust and drew back.

"What are you afraid of? Me? Why, I'm your friend. Kallistrat told me to come over. What are you shaking for? You're queer, you and the rest of 'em . . ."

The din of his voice was disagreeable and sounded at the same time like the lisp of a child.

"I'll make it right," he continued. "I like doing it."

He wiped his dirty hand on one boot, groaning as he stooped; it was probably an effort to bend his powerful back. Mironoff looked at him with awe and, not knowing what to say, enquired:

"Where is the carpenter?"

"Oh, Kallistrat? Don't go near him. He's mad, the old rascal, because you didn't let him paint your house."

Opening his terrible mouth very wide, the carter sighed three times. It sounded like the winter wind moaning in a chimney, and made Mironoff want to pull his head fearfully between his shoulders.

"You are stronger than him," he said.

"Of course I am. I joined a circus once. I wrestled there. The dirty dogs broke my fingers, or I'd have had them all down. They beat me by cunning, not by strength."

He turned and plunged his spade into the hard earth as easily as if it were made of butter, turning over the dark sod about the roots of the apple tree, full of wriggling worms.

"Everybody's afraid of me here because of my strength. But I'm kind to people and I like to talk to them. Of course, my voice scares them. . . . Last year my cart ran over a man—his leg it was. When I was tried, the judge screamed at me: 'Don't shout so,' but I couldn't help it. So he acquitted me."

"Are you married?"

"Good God, is any woman fool enough to marry me? Look at my lip."

Mironoff knew that the townspeople regarded all peasants with mingled hostility and contempt. Both his father and mother had inculcated that attitude into him from his earliest childhood. But with Artamon, he felt only fear and astonishment, and a vague sense of hope. If he made friends with this peasant, then the carpenter . . .

"Working, is he?" The resounding voice of Kallistrat boomed from above. He was sitting on one of the fence posts, smoking a cigarette, his bare legs dangling over the garden, his fair head encircled by a wreath of blue smoke, the black leather band standing out clearly on the white forehead.

"Merciful Heavens!" muttered Mironoff to himself. "Is he going to start tormenting me again?"

"Look here, Kallistrat," he began, straightening out his stooping back and gesticulating, "what is it you want? I don't care to . . ."

But he could not speak clearly. A nervous irritation caught at his throat, stopped the words in his mouth.

"What don't you care to . . . ?" came the enquiry from above.

"You'd better stop! I'll bring a complaint!"

"Against me? What for?"

The impassive questions irritated Mironoff still more, and he shrieked, stamping his foot:

"I won't have you digging about here and cutting my grass!"

Lightly as a bird, Kallistrat glided through the air into the garden, seized Mironoff by the shoulder and, giving him a gentle shake, spoke in an impressive tone:

"Pull yourself together, d'you hear? Are you mad? Here you have people working for you for nothing. You ought to be grateful to them, lad, instead of . . ."

But Mironoff was already ashamed of his sudden burst of temper. He felt as though the carpenter's hand had pushed him into the ground and squeezed the anger out of him. The carter, leaning on his spade, opened his mouth wider than ever and seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

"I see," muttered Mironoff.

"You see, but nevertheless, you yell."

"Of course, I'm very grateful . . ."

"Well, so you ought to be!" And the carpenter gave him a gentle push with his finger and walked over to Artamon, telling him severely: "Tie up those twigs, understand? And throw away those dead raspberry bushes."

"It's true," thought Mironoff, "they are working for nothing." And to show his gratitude, he decided to invite them to a meal.

Half an hour later, the three of them were sitting at the kitchen table. The samovar was boiling, the vodka sparkled in the decanter, and on the table were plates of pickled mushrooms and sour cabbage. Artamon drank vodka and tea very much as a calf sucks milk, and gobbled his food, grunting and snorting, while the carpenter extracted with his fork the tenderest, tiniest, most slippery mushrooms from the plate before him, lifted his glass with two fingers and, turning it to the light, wrinkling his nose and half closing his eyes, drank it down with a cluck. One could not help noticing that every gesture was executed with unusual ease, skill and originality. An unpleasant fellow, but very interesting. And not mad at all—just cunning.

"If I like anyone, I'll do anything for him," he was saying, as he held his glass with two fingers and mincingly spread out the other three. "But I am forced to add, I don't care much for people. They're all fools."

"Ugh, you devil!" muttered Artamon, leaning back against the wall and throwing out his colossal chest.

"I'm a clever fellow," continued Kallistrat, "I'm capable. I can do anything because I know how. But simple things don't interest me . . ."

Mironoff drank two glasses of vodka, which he disliked, and soon felt his brain swimming in a fog. He listened in silence as usual to the boastful words of the carpenter, feeling only an exasperating sensation of boredom that sucked at his heart. He was annoyed, too, when Artamon fell asleep, began snoring and, waking up with a guilty start, glanced in fear at the carpenter. Kallistrat twirled the ends of his golden moustache with both hands, and said to the carter:

"Now, home you go! You've had your fill, you camel!"

Artamon meekly went away. Kallistrat expressed a wish to inspect the rest of the house, and his host, with the same obedience as shown by the carter, led the way into his sunny bedroom. It had one window opening on to the garden and another over the street. Kallistrat went to the bed, uncereemoniously poked the mattress and murmured:

"Soft bed, that!" Then, with a glance at the books on the shelf, he asked: "Do you read them?"

"Yes."

"All?"

"Yes."

Mironoff thought he could detect a touch of sarcasm in the questions of his unwelcome guest, and the latter's behaviour became more and more off-hand.

They next went into a small drawing-room, with flowers on the three window-sills and two trellises which his father had skilfully made. Kallistrat stood stock still in the middle of the room, and after a silence turned to Mironoff:

"You ought to get married."

Everything in the room seemed to protest against the intrusion of this barefooted visitor with a band round his head. The very planks of the door creaked, the lamp-glass on the table tinkled, the Sunday plate and other presents to Mironoff's mother from her husband and friends jingled in the tallboy. Mironoff was offended that Kallistrat seemed to regard all these objects as commonplace and usual. He was surprised at nothing. Nor did he praise anything.

"He envies me, that's what it is, and he pretends to be indifferent, the devil!"

The tinkle of the glass sounded more loudly as the carpenter knocked at the pane.

"This a globe?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I've seen these before. A model image of the earth. But why out of brass?"

"It plays a tune."

"Can't be," said Kallistrat, shaking his head, and demanded: "Show me how it works."

Mironoff opened the cupboard, set the globe on the table and turned the crank. Some of the tiny spurs had come off, others were blunt; there were some teeth missing in the steel comb, but one could still easily distinguish that the earth, turning round its axis, wearily hummed:

"Siskin, Siskin.

Where have you been?"

The carpenter drew away from the table and listened.

"That *Siskin*?" he enquired.

"Yes," said Mironoff with a sad smile as he thought of the past and continued to turn the globe. Then Kallistrat stopped his hand, poked at the continents and oceans, rapping the brass with his nail and sat down.

"Where did you get that?" he asked thoughtfully.

"My father made it."

"Why does it play *Siskin*?"

"A childish song. I was a mere child at the time."

"I see," answered the other, putting the end of his beard into his mouth and chewing it reflectively. At last, blowing it out as though snuffing a flame, he rapped the Arctic Ocean and grimly smiled.

"It's amusing. Though *Siskin* is scarcely appropriate. The globe is a means of instruction and it doesn't make sense when you hear all of a sudden the *Siskin*. Was your father clever?"

"Yes. And very gay."

"Hm! Odd creatures . . ."

He sighed as he again examined the globe, stroking the brass with his varnish-stained finger and continued mockingly:



"It's simple, and yet full of wisdom. A drop of water, a few clods of earth, and we're told it hangs suspended in space. Remarkable. And millions of people are said to live on that ball, eh? Seems a queer guess. Do you believe that, you poor orphan?"

"Why not? I'm living on it, and so are you," Mironoff replied wearily.

"Well," said Kallistrat, rising and offering his hand, "many thanks. Till next time."

He paused in the kitchen, clutched his beard in one hand, and said grimly:

"The whole thing no bigger than your head, and yet . . . Very remarkable. But I must say *Siskin* is not appropriate. It's also mischievous and intended to make people gasp. Same as whistling in church. It ought not to have been *Siskin* but *Hosannah*, or some other church tune, or else a military march. Trahm, Ta-ra-rahm—like that."

And, humming a martial air, he departed.

"Go to the devil!" Mironoff threw after him in his thoughts. When he returned to the room and took up the globe to return it to the cupboard, he noticed that a part of North America was split, unstuck and bent southwards. That fool Kallistrat had done it with his nail! Wetting the tip of one finger, he re-established order in the damaged continent and turned the globe once more to hear the low tinkling sound, the little tune, disfigured by time. He sighed, thinking that Kallistrat was probably right. Some other tune would have been more appropriate. But which? Other tunes, quite as unsuitable, came to his mind.

"On a rather dirty street  
Friend Ivan lurched along,  
Rather drunk . . ."

Then there was his father's old favourite:

"Seven sous, seven sous,  
What shall we do with seven sous?"

And what others besides?

"I wish to tell you, tell you, tell you . . ."

That piece of North America came loose again. It was odd to watch the scrap of blue paper move on its own accord and curl up like a shaving.

"I'll mend it tomorrow with glue. Why, I wonder, did he say it ought to play *Hosannah*? Surely he doesn't believe in God either?"

His elbows on the table, his forehead almost touching the globe, Mironoff surrendered himself to the flood of vague, unfamiliar thoughts.

The street urchins had thrown mud at the blue façade of the house and the shutters; they had scratched off the paint and written indecent words here and there. On the topmost panel of the gate, someone—evidently an adult—had carefully written the following sentences in lead pencil:

"THIS HOUSE STANDS UPSIDE DOWN. A FOOL LIVES HERE."

When Mironoff first saw this, he was deeply offended, but, noticing that the last comma was misplaced, clearly showing the writer's ignorance of grammar, he was greatly relieved. Fool yourself!

The entire street demonstrated with unmistakable emphasis its hostility to the blue house, but Mironoff felt no irritation, no disturbance. He was much too deeply concerned by something more serious, more ponderous: the carpenter and the carter had fastened themselves upon him like two shadows. Artamon called nearly every afternoon to sweep up the yard, chop wood, work in the garden and growl, while the carpenter, behaving as though he were lord of the place, took it upon himself to direct various improvements, and even made suggestions to the speechless Pavlovna about her housekeeping. The old woman listened to his stern, loud words, bending her head in apology, but as soon as he left would quickly make the sign of the cross. Mironoff had often noticed this performance and, although he smiled at the woman's simplicity, it intensified his hostility to Kallistrat. That man was somehow destroying his dream of a sky-blue life, devoid of thought, raising before it an almost concrete barrier of vague apprehension and pushing him, Mironoff, into the background, into the corner. One day, he summoned up all his courage to say to Kallistrat:

"All this is utter nonsense."

"You try and see if you can live without nonsense!" returned Kallistrat severely.

Mironoff began to regard the intruder with feelings almost of fear. There was something abnormal about his agility, he seemed to move too lightly about the earth—that day, for instance, when Kallistrat had glided down from the garden wall like a bird through the air! A vague presentiment of something out of the ordinary settled upon Mironoff's mind and oppressed him. Whenever he thought of Kallistrat, he heard the floor creak and the glass tinkle. Why was it that when he walked into the room everything remained motionless, but at the appearance of the carpenter it creaked and tinkled? Why was it that every time he came in, the same thing occurred? Mironoff did not believe in sorcery, but he had heard and read about persons who possessed strange mysterious powers and he could not escape the conviction that soon, perhaps the very next day, the carpenter would reveal this power, reveal it in some terrible way.

It happened quite unexpectedly. On Sunday evening, Kallistrat came in, bringing a young girl with him, plump, with short legs. She dazzled Mironoff with her scarlet silk blouse, and the greedy glitter of a row of small teeth in a small fish's mouth. Her puffy cheeks glowed with a slightly purple flush. A pink stone sparkled on one of the fingers of her left hand. Her eyes, it seemed to Mironoff, reflected the pink tint of the stone; they looked like the eyes of a white mouse.

"Her name is Serafima," said Kallistrat, pushing her toward Mironoff. "A fine girl."

She smiled. An irritating smell emanated from her. When she sat down, her white skirt, tightly drawn over the large hemispheres of her hips, slipped up, revealing a pair of round legs. She shuffled her shoes over the floor, and stamped with her heels. Her dark hair was brushed back smoothly, the braid folded sleekly on the back of her neck. In it she had stuck a large yellow comb, and it reminded Mironoff of a hen.

"How awfully hot!" she exclaimed, fanning her flushed face with a small white handkerchief.

The carpenter was dressed in a grey canvas jacket, an embroidered blue shirt, and brightly polished boots into the tops of which he had thrust his cloth trousers. His beard and golden hair appeared to have undergone a thorough cleaning

and danced like tongues of flame. His grey, hawk-like face was graver and more restless than ever, his green eyes sparkled malignantly, seeming to see and understand everything.

"She's not fussy, she understands housekeeping, and, as you can see, all things of the flesh," he said, watching the "fine girl" pour out tea into the glasses while in a deep, luscious voice she asked Mironoff:

"Like it strong?"

Mironoff sat opposite her, leaning over the table. His eyes twitched, his lips trembled. He wanted to pull out his tongue and wet his lips as he had seen the "fine girl" do when she licked the jam off the spoon. But he forced himself to smile, to let this hen of a woman see his ugly teeth. Her lips were very red, and thick—like two layers of them. He observed her sucking the cherry stones until they were dead white. Such lips might suck all the blood out of a man. The carpenter's words, "all things of the flesh," and her question, "Like it strong?" made him blush, evoking unseemly images. He purposely knocked his spoon against the edge of his glass and spilled tea over his trousers. Jumping up, he hurried out on to the porch. A lazy drizzle fell upon the warm earth; the leaves of the trees tinkled softly; dove-coloured clouds, compressing space, condensed the unbearable heat.

"He wants me to marry that woman," thought Mironoff, as he caught the large rare drops of rain in the outstretched palms of his hands and rubbed them. The irritating smell of the girl's sweat was still in his nostrils; though it filled him with repulsion, another sensation arose, also oppressive, but compelling.

Presently the carpenter appeared on the porch.

"Did you burn yourself?" he asked.

"Now listen," began Mironoff in a hurried undertone, his hands pressed to his chest, "I don't want to get married. Please give up the idea."

He remembered his mother's words and repeated them now with delight, raising his fist:

"What kind of a husband would I make? A husband should be like that! Why, you said the same thing yourself. Take her away! I'll give her twenty-five roubles and you may have fifty, if you like. I mean it."

His legs shook, he almost felt like dropping on his knees in front of Kallistrat who stood there, a step higher on the porch, smiling mercilessly, twisting the end of his beard and laying down the law.

"You're quite mad, Mironoff, my boy. Why, you've simply got to get married. You've lost yourself in books, you're dreaming your life away. Look at yourself: you're positively livid. Your lips are trembling. Why? I'm telling you why. It's time you lived according to law. Get yourself a wife and then there'll be children . . ."

"I can't. I don't want to . . ."

"It's just what you *can* do, better than trying to astonish people. There's nothing you can astonish them with. Other people will only fool you."

Mironoff stood with bent head. The carpenter took him by the arm, raised him up, and shaking the rain from his clothes, went on:

"I know human nature. People will pretend to your face that they think you are remarkable, that they are interested in you, but at the same moment they'll rob and deceive you. That happens all the time, I tell you."

His eyes tightly shut, Mironoff saw a vision of a mass of street urchins throwing mud at sky-blue houses. They were his children, all of them. His wife, this "fine girl," sat at the window munching pickled apples and fish pies—both things he loathed.

And again he was sitting opposite Serafima; she seemed to have become plumper than ever. The balls of her breasts heaved, making the stiff scarlet silk of her blouse rustle; her small round mouth gaped wearily. She clutched her white cambric handkerchief tightly in her sausage-like fingers, frequently wiping the perspiration from her forehead. Her pink eyes melted in a smile. Her perspiration, thought Mironoff, must be thick and oily as syrup, and no doubt neither flies nor mosquitoes would have the courage to attack her india-rubber body. Meantime, the carpenter poured cherry-vodka into his tea and gulped down the hot, dark beverage; his dry face acquired a purple flush from it, his eyes lost their colour, and his speech became more dictatorial. Shamelessly, boastfully, he declared:

"What I like best is to arrange marriages. I'm fond of noise, excitement. I like rows. I enjoy watching people standing on their heads. It's fun to see young people falling in love."

But there was no fun on his face as he said this, not the shadow of a smile. Stealing a look in his direction, Mironoff noticed that his face was twitching. At that moment it was terrible to look at. It was fortunate that the carpenter did not wear his black leather band round his head today.

"You must learn to enjoy life, Mironoff, my lad. Move about freely, you know. If you sin, there's no great harm in that. Are you accountable to anybody? Who's your master, tell me?"

"I don't know," stammered Mironoff.

That question somehow terrified him.

"There. You see? If it weren't for this girl here, I'd tell you soon enough who ought to be your master at your age. I can't do so. But she knows what I mean, the rogue! Don't you, Fimka?"

"I know nothing at all," answered the "fine girl" sleepily, and, a moment later, Mironoff felt something touch his foot, and after that two feet encircled it and held it fast. This sensation, frightening away a vague but important and distressing thought, filled Mironoff with dismay. Pulling away his leg, he jumped up, exclaiming:

"What are you doing?"

The girl's cheeks, chin, neck and forehead flushed scarlet. Kallistrat poked Mironoff in the side, laughing loudly:

"She knows! The rogue, she knows!"

Mironoff could not recall what happened afterwards when the carpenter left the room with a laugh and the girl approached him, smiling:

"You naughty boy, why did you embarrass me like that before my uncle?"

She seated herself at his side and enquired if he liked giblet soup, to which Mironoff answered that in Paris giblets were thrown to the dogs; in that city people disliked such filthy messes as soaked apples, and the inhabitants were noble-minded folk who never dreamed of forcing their way into other people's houses . . .

Suddenly an unsuspected force brought him to his feet, whisked him around in a thick, hot darkness in which the girl disappeared and the carpenter re-entered, seized him by the hand and enquired from what seemed to be a great distance:

"You fool! Why do you push the girl around in this way? How dare you? She is my niece, not yet your wife. And this broken plate? What's come over you?"

Mironoff listened in amazement. Though Kallistrat stood close by his side, his voice seemed to come from under the floor. Bits of broken cups crunched under the soles of his shoes: everything in the room swayed.

"You can't stand wine, I see. Then don't drink it," Kallistrat said sternly, and offered him a glass of bluish-looking water. Mironoff peered into his face and closed his eyes tightly . . .

When he woke up next morning, he thought he had only dreamed of the "fine girl," just as he had dreamed of a fox, a large fawn-coloured animal dashing round amid the stars, licking them. This had brought on such a suffocating, depressing darkness that the entire earth seemed to have dropped into a bottomless well and only far off on the horizon one semi-circle of clear sky remained, but even there the stars were being wiped out by the lilac-coloured priest Boris, who was swinging a censer that formed with its smoke the following words: "TO LET. ROOM FOR A SINGLE MAN."

This dream had terrified him and, waking up, Mironoff went to the kitchen for a drink of water, but on his way he stepped into something slimy on the floor and returned in disgust to bed, tormented by thirst, and unable to sleep. Now, sitting up, he saw that his foot and the sheet were stained with cherry jam and a look at the wet, freshly-washed floor convinced him completely that the events of the night before were not a dream but reality. With a deep sigh, he decided:

"The day after tomorrow, I'll sell the house and all my belongings; I'll go to Paris, and rent a room for a single man. I must learn to speak French." And he took down his grammar, opened it at random, and read this threatening question:

"Que savez-vous sur Bernardin de St. Pierre?"

Between the pages he discovered a small, grey, pressed butterfly and, gazing at it, fell into a mournful meditation. Suppose, he wondered, when he arrived in Paris, the people began asking him about St. Bernardin? He knew nothing about that Saint. . . . And, closing the book, he thrust it under his pillow, laughing at the sudden delightful, simple and clear idea that had just come to him: how wonderfully convenient and pleasant it was to know only the strictly necessary words and none of the others! This gave one the right of not understanding other people, not having to think of all they said. This was the way to assure one's self of a peaceful existence. Yes, exactly, he thought, shaking his head, watching the pendulum of the clock creeping along the wall and trying in vain to sever two nosegays of blue flowers from the wallpaper. But why wait until the day after tomorrow to sell the house? Why not sell it today? And the carpenter would not be allowed to enter Paris.

He laughed in old Pavlovna's face as she suddenly appeared in front of him out of nowhere, and he strode past her from room to room making a rough estimate of the furniture, of the flowers. "Seven hundred, four hundred roubles," he calculated quickly. No, that's not the way to count. And he corrected himself aloud: "One thousand, one hundred," he said. But he still liked counting in his own way better: it gave a lot more noughts and a nought was such a simple, reassuring thing. "Noughts, noughts, noughts," he sang, as Pavlovna followed him, sternly ordering him to come and drink his tea. He drank one glass; it tasted somewhat bitter, and he determined to go out into the fields beyond the river, to lie all day on the sand among the juniper bushes, returning to sleep at a hotel in town when it grew dark.

"Try and find me there!"

But he changed his mind after all, took his fishing-rods and went down to the river. As he passed the gate, he looked up at the windows of Rosanoff's house and saw Lisa, who was wiping the window-pane. He went up to her quickly and, speaking in a whisper, said:

"It is essential that I should talk to you about Paris. Please meet me this evening at the churchyard."



Lisa drew back without answering, but this did not trouble him—he was convinced that the girl would come.

He did no fishing that day, only lay on the bank in the bushes, looking up at the clear sky that roused neither anxiety nor meditation. He fell asleep from time to time, passing the day thus until the sun, swelling and reddening as it always did before setting, stood just above the roof of the principal building of the lunatic asylum.

Returning home, he ate supper, changed into his Sunday clothes, and began to think:

“The carpenter will come and ask what I’m going to do. I had better go into the garden.

“I’m no fool. I’m clever, I am. That’s because I don’t like thinking.”

He could see in the garden, neatly swept and trimmed by Artamon, the stubble left from the cut burdocks sticking up like pipes. A mouse peeped out from one of the pipes. The night was warm and damp. Mironoff imagined that the pipes were softly playing the familiar soothing strains of a cradle-song, so softly and caressingly that not even the mouse was startled. Before him rose the vision of a slim girl dressed in light blue; he could hear her voice. It was unusually pleasant, and the fact that he did not catch the meaning of her words made the sound more tender. He would sell his house to this girl’s father, sell it cheaply and then he would allow him to marry her, take her to Paris to live in that room for a single man . . .

He sat there a long time in a daze and was brought back to reality by the piercing yells of boys who were excitedly chasing somebody. A voice brutally rent the silence of the evening, crying:

“Go round the other way! Hold him!”

Mironoff jumped to his feet just as the small kitchen clock warningly struck eight.

“It’s time!” he said. “It’s time!”

He strode to the gate, walked down the street swinging his cane, and made his way to the sandy hillocks. There, on the grey humps, the brick quadrangle of the churchyard wall outlined in chalk rose to greet him. He could distinguish the brass on the cross above the chapel. The churchyard was new

and had as yet few graves. Between the graves, red pines and puny birches struggled for existence in the poor soil, not yet sufficiently fertilised by the bodies of the dead. The grey blades of grass pierced through the sand and pathetically stretched out to the sky, the dusty green tufts hidden in the shade beside the graves. Mironoff slowly walked along the gravel path; he noticed some ants dragging a pine-needle. He took aim at one and struck at it with his cane, but missed.

"Very well," he said, smiling, "live on, if you want to."

Over the wall, he could see the strip of road along which Lisa was to come; beyond it, houses and gardens ran down to the leaden river's edge, and among them tiny toy-like persons, at whom Mironoff shook his cane, appeared and vanished again.

"You'll stay where you are, all of you, while I go to Paris! I'm sick of you all!"

The factory chimney on the far side of the river spat out clouds of dirty smoke, dimming the evening sky, still tinged with red on the horizon. A dark cloud, flourishing a tail, threatened the red patch.

"What boredom!"

He recalled the carpenter's favourite words.

At that very moment he saw him approaching, twirling his beard in one hand, and holding the other under his apron. He was walking with slow, measured steps as though pacing off the ground along the road towards the sandy hills. Mironoff's heart sank as he realised with bated breath:

"He's spying on me. Here he is, the minute I think of him!"

Kallistrat advanced some distance, then turned sharply into the field towards two aged fir-trees standing away from the road, as though leading himself by the beard.

"None of your tricks," said Mironoff, crouching behind the wall and watching the carpenter through a square between the bricks.

His legs shook, and somewhere deep inside him fear stirred. He knelt down lower to the warm bricks, spreading out his hands as though he were being crucified. Peeping through the hole in the wall, he cocked a snook at the carpenter, muttering:

"None of your tricks . . . !"

But Kallistrat had turned off again toward the road, stopped and began doing something with his hands. Mironoff understood at once—he wanted to show him that he was counting on his fingers. He stood with his back to Mironoff facing the street, the same street where Lisa was due to appear, and when she appeared . . . What would happen then? One could not visualise it, but it would be something terrible, of course. Mironoff wanted to scream.

But Lisa did not come. The carpenter took the leather band from his head, shook his golden mane threateningly, put the band on again, and walked slowly down the road.

Dense clouds rose from beneath the place where Kallistrat "He'll hide somewhere and then catch us," thought Mironoff.

By now he realised clearly that he would be unable to hide from Kallistrat; he would find him wherever he went and force him to marry that "fine girl"—force him to do whatever he, the carpenter, wanted, keep him to heel, as he did with Artamon, in spite of the latter's physical strength. Pressing his forehead hard against the rough bricks, he suddenly remembered the carpenter's question, "Who's your master?" And he recalled the loathsome laughter with which this was uttered.

"He knows there is no one to protect me, he knows it . . ." lay hidden; they rose like the smoke of a great fire, so thick that it seemed you could almost walk on them. He shuddered with fear, remembering the carpenter's words, grasping their deeper meaning.

"You have nothing to astonish people with."

Astonishing people simply meant doing things differently from everyone else. The main thing is to think of nothing except the commonplace. To keep out of people's way. Apparently this is impossible because of the carpenter. That cunning fellow had discovered the man who has no master, who is alone, and can be made to do as he wishes.

"Yes, it is so," Mironoff almost screamed, "they all call on God, but it's the carpenter who is the boss, ordering people about like dogs, as if he was a hunter."

Such angry, painful reflections were forced into his head by Kallistrat. He realised their futility, he had no use for them. He had never felt this way before he met the carpenter.

Grey crumpled rags of clouds crawled above the churchyard, covering the sky with dirty splotches. It reminded him of his mother going about the house, half drunk, wiping a dirty rag over the window-panes, the cupboards and the mirrors, dulling their clearness with oily smears.

There was moisture in the air as the last rays of light disappeared over the sandy graves. Mironoff at last stood up and looked towards the road, but it seemed to have been swallowed up by the earth. Walking quickly, but trying not to make too much noise as he crossed the gravel path, he trudged home. As he came near his gate, he perceived that there were still lights in the Rosanoff house. He ran up to one window and tapped lightly on it with his cane. The round face of Clavdia appeared. Mironoff said in a low voice:

"Tell her to beware of the carpenter."

"What?" asked the girl in a frightened whisper.

"He's watching."

Clavdia closed the window. It was as though a large bird had folded its wings. Mironoff thought he heard a cry of terror behind that window, followed by a peal of laughter. Peering cautiously around, he crossed the street and entered his own yard. Something small and dark rose from the steps. It struck him from afar without touching him. He drew back.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"It's me. Who else?" answered Pavlovna.

He looked closely at her and agreed that it was she.

"The carpenter has been asking for you," she continued.

"I'm not at home!" he whispered, and then added firmly:  
"I'm never at home any more!"

He went into his room and, without lighting the lamp, undressed and went to bed. He could not sleep. He was bothered by the mosquitoes. His heart was heavy and he felt that the carpenter was not far away, perhaps out there in the garden, hiding behind the window, or out on the roof by the chimney, twisting his beard in his hand and deciding what ordeal to inflict on Mironoff on the morrow. Throwing back the covers, he sat bolt upright, his bare feet on the cool floor,

listening. Not a sound but the soft lazy patter of rain on the roof. A lonely mosquito, lost in the warm, oppressive darkness of the room, whined plaintively. He took his pillow and sat holding it on his knee, waiting.

"I must kill that mosquito."

He rocked to and fro wearily and fell asleep, still holding the pillow, awoke again with a start, sat up and listened. The grey dusk of dawn gradually penetrated the room, creeping in slowly through the dark, motionless leaves of the flowers on the window-sill. His head whirled with a multitude of futile, incoherent memories, but he sat there waiting, meekly waiting for the moment when it would all vanish. That moment came; everything around him condensed into one solid lump and hurled him into a bottomless space, into black, motionless silence. It happened when the sun had already risen and painted liquid pearls on the moist window-pane. Dazed, Mironoff rolled over and fell into a deep sleep. It seemed that he was roused only a moment later by a strange screeching sound. A man dressed in yellow entered the room. He sat on the edge of the bed, making it squeak piercingly, took Mironoff's hand in his podgy, moist palm and pulled a black watch out of his pocket. Looking at it, he asked in a high-pitched voice, as if he were an old friend:

"Well, and how do we feel?"

"Feel what?" answered Mironoff crossly.

"Has your pain gone?"

"Who is Yourpane?" asked Mironoff in a tone of bold sarcasm.

"How did you sleep?"

"Lying down."

Mironoff burst into loud laughter, delighted with his own quick wit. He felt full of unwonted energy and very cheerful. He liked this stocky little fellow, even though he reeked of boot polish. He resembled one of those funny toys that stand up at once when you knock them down. His face was puffy and blue, and his eyes, of a queer yellow, like rayless stars on a wet night, floated amusingly on this blue surface. Mironoff glanced towards the window: a bluish cloud glided swiftly along the ridge of the sky, reminding him of something unpleasant, something in the past. The little man rubbed his

blue chin with the palm of his hand, and his dentures creaked as he asked:

"Do you know me? I'm the assistant doctor, Isakoff."

A little embarrassed and trying to conceal it, Mironoff enquired what time it was.

"Half past twelve."

"Hah! I'm hungry."

"That is a very healthy sign," approved the other, putting his watch back into his pocket. The room was flooded with sunlight and the words seemed to float in it like rainbow-tinted bubbles. Mironoff pondered as he watched them glide:

"If only it were always like that!"

"What?"

"Everything."

Deep in his heart he felt a happiness that lifted him above the earth. Barefooted, in his underclothes, he went into the kitchen to wash, but stopped at the door. He had caught sight of a shock of golden hair encircled by a leather band. Kalistrat was bent over the table writing something with a pencil in a dirty note-book. Mironoff turned back noiselessly and sat down on his bed. All his new-found energy and happiness had vanished.

"What's the matter?" asked the doctor in his sing-song voice and pressed his fingers to the patient's temples. Mironoff pushed his hand away, shook his head, and asked in a whisper:

"Did he bring you here?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Where did he spend the night?"

"How should I know? People usually spend their nights at home."

"But he's not usual."

"How so?"

Mironoff made no answer to this, nor to any of the other questions put by the doctor. He rocked to and fro, his hands leaning on the edge of the bed, biting his lips and wondering desperately how he was to rid himself of the carpenter. The assistant doctor passed into the kitchen, the soles of his shoes creaking as he walked, while Mironoff ran to the window and began throwing the flower pots out into the garden. He had

already put one foot on the sill when he felt himself seized in an iron grip and held back under the arms. He knew without seeing who it was who held him, and submitted to the superior power, allowing himself to be led back to bed again, where he lay down without saying a word. Closing his eyes, he listened to the whispers of the other two and, distinguishing in the darkness the grey little hooks of words, watched them deftly catching at one another and forming meaningless sounds. The doctor was whispering something shapeless. His words flew past Mironoff like grey, rugged shadows; they disturbed and distressed him. He opened his eyes.

"What's wrong with you, my boy? Feeling sick?"

The green light in Kallistrat's eyes reminded Mironoff of something he had already experienced. He had seen these two green lights, this sharp, hawk-like face before. It seemed years ago, when he was a boy.

"What are you staring at? Don't you know me?"

"He's trying to make me remember," thought Mironoff, and said aloud: "It seems I've seen you before. . . . Yes, that's it . . ."

"Couldn't we give him some kind of . . . ?"

"Kind? They mean me. I'm kind," thought Mironoff. "They're going to poison me."

He drew back against the wall, sat up, his legs under him, stared into a corner of the ceiling, and then, with a cold shudder, saw a green square clearly outlined on the wall. It was the picture, "The Death of a Sinner." A sharp-faced, bearded, green devil stared from one corner of it, laughing silently. Everything became crystal clear to him and time seemed to stop. That was why the carpenter had ruined the sky-blue house; why he could swim through the air; why he liked noise and excitement. "Who is your master?" he asked himself triumphantly, because now he knew: Konstantin Mironoff does not believe in the ordinary God, the God of ordinary people. . . . It was all clear now. But what was to be his next step? He felt hot and frightened. Without uncrossing his legs or releasing them from the clasp of his arms, he rolled over on one side.

"I want to sleep," he said.

"But what about something to eat?" asked the doctor.

"No, I'm going to sleep."

"Well, that's good for you, too."

The two went out, Kallistrat saying softly to the other:

"Just like a baby."

He might deceive the doctor with that, but not Mironoff, who had now realised what he ought to do. But the first thing was to hide from the carpenter. After lying down for a few moments, he got up, wrapped himself in a sheet, and looked at himself in the mirror with a sigh. He was sorry he had no beard: that would have made him look more like Lazarus risen from the grave. He turned away from the mirror with a shudder, having felt a shadow pass over the sparkling depth and lure him on, demanding that he should sink into it. He supported himself against the door, and muttered in a whisper: "I'm coming, I'm coming at once, my Lord." He peered through the door and saw that the kitchen was empty. The samovar stood on the table, shining like sunlight. Little clouds of steam hovered over it. Mironoff went to it and turned the tap. He felt impelled to do that, but when he saw the clear jet of steaming water trickle down and melt away on the surface of the tray, he was afraid. He stopped and listened. Somewhere out in the yard he heard Pavlovna whisper and the carpenter's hammering voice.

"No! Him?"

"Him" was, of course, God, the ordinary God of all people. Kallistrat had already discovered that Mironoff was going to go to him, to the ordinary God. But what he had heard was maybe:

"Know him?" And the carpenter had said it, perhaps, raising a threatening fist at the old woman. Scarcely touching the floor with his feet, with bated breath, Mironoff went into the hall and climbed the stairs to the attic, inhaling deep breaths of the hot and musty smell of dust, cats and birds. Closing the door behind him, he knelt down facing the little semi-circular window. He began to sing a Psalm, crossing himself and bowing his head to the floor. He had forgotten the words, and stopped a moment to reflect. Rising and standing near the window, he turned to the sky and said in a loud voice:



"Forgive me, I was wrong . . . I pray . . ."

But the carpenter was nearer to him than God. He had heard the confession of his victim and cried out anxiously:

"Look! There he is, at the attic window!"

Mironoff rushed back to the door, dragging against it everything he could lay his hands on: broken furniture, boxes, baskets, and boards, and, as he piled up all this junk at the door, he kept making the sign of the cross and murmuring: "God protect me!" Meanwhile, the carpenter had rushed upstairs and was now thumping on the attic door, shouting:

"Konstantin! See here! Listen to me, I tell you . . . Stop being a fool . . . !"

"Afraid, are you?" Mironoff said very loudly, and laughed, feeling himself secure, knowing that the carpenter had been rendered impotent by the sign of the cross.

"Konstantin, I'm your pal, aren't I?"

"No!" shouted Mironoff, and seizing a loose brick from the chimney, flung it against the door. It struck one of the boxes. The resounding noise strengthened his resolution to defend himself against the carpenter. The barricade at the door began to dance as though animated by the carpenter's sorcery: chairs and boxes tumbled and creaked. Mironoff watched the vain efforts of his adversary and laughed. Finally, however, straining under the carpenter's violent attacks, the wooden door cracked, the barricade collapsed and the door fell in. The figure of Kallistrat, framed in the gaping doorway, bewildered Mironoff for a moment, but he had time to seize another brick and throw it straight at Kallistrat's brass-coloured beard. The carpenter gave a grunt, threw his bare arms wildly in the air, and fell backwards down the stairs with a mighty crash. Mironoff, overcome with ecstatic joy, leapt and shouted, throwing down on his enemy everything he could lay hands on. He roared with laughter to hear the desperate cries:

"Help! Water! The Fire Brigade! He'll kill himself!"

Mironoff stopped for an instant and listened. Outside in the street he could hear the drone of the crowd, the shrieks of the boys and then the familiar, solid, dignified, bass tones of Rosanoff saying:

"It was you who sent him out of his mind."

"Yes," cried Mironoff, "it's he! Do you know who he is? Can you see? Ha!"

He was suffocating with joy. Now everybody knew who the carpenter was. He was about to go downstairs when he was stopped short by the carpenter's voice:

"No roughness, Artamon, do you hear?"

Did that mean that Artamon, too, had discovered the truth about him and thrown off the magic spell? But the carter himself had meantime got through the attic doorway sideways, blindly kicking aside the wreckage on his way. Fiercely opening his triangular mouth, spreading his great fingers and stretching out his hands, he advanced toward Mironoff with a growl:

"What's all the fuss about? Steady, boy, steady, it's all right . . ."

Of course, Kallistrat had instructed Artamon to deal with him as though he had been a horse.

"I'm not a horse," muttered Mironoff, amazed at the carpenter's cunning and retreating from the arms stretched out like shafts, but Artamon came nearer and nearer, roaring:

"Don't be afraid, you fool!"

Something hard and hot came down on Mironoff's head. He could move no further. The carter had forced him into a scalding iron corner. Then, making a desperate attempt to escape, Mironoff threw himself on all fours and crawled towards Artamon, but the carter seized him by the shoulders and picked him up, head downwards, grunting:

"Caught him!"

Mironoff knocked his head against a hard dark mist. His body seemed to dissolve and melt away. Later, the darkness slowly dispersed and he realised that he was lying on something soft that swayed and floated. His arms and legs were broken off, his head felt abnormally large and had become so heavy that he had not the strength to lift it: black and white spots swirled in it, obliterating each other. The words of his father's little song rang softly in his ears:

"Seven sous, seven sous,

What shall we do with seven sous?"

A light blue sky spread above, indistinct white figures floated in the soft light, urging him on: now two of them

bent over him, with quick nimble movements fixed on to him a new pair of very weak arms and legs, cleaned out his head, making it light, almost empty, and then, rocking him, carried him up and up into the blue canopy overhead. Mironoff realised that God had heard his prayer and sent His angels to kidnap him from the earth. Yes, there was God Himself, tall, dressed in white, with golden spectacles, answering Mironoff's cry of gladness with a silent, gentle nod. He floated past, caressing him with a cool breeze and the delicious odour of flowers. Mironoff's ecstasy was all the greater because this was not the simple old God of ordinary folk, but the true and wise Maker of infinite, harmonious stillness. In His world, everything was now quiet and gentle, a wonderfully transparent, almost invisible water had washed him clean, and when the Maker of the Blue Stillness again appeared to Him, he knew that with this God it was necessary to speak in the language of Paris:

"Je vous remercie, mon Dieu. Je vous remercie que vous . . ."

He could go no further in French and lapsed into Russian.

"Forgive me, I don't really know the language yet. It's most difficult. I find it very hard. The other God, the old, ordinary God, had not the power to help me out. I don't like Him. I have always wanted to come to You, even at the beginning. Long ago."

"How long?" asked the Maker of the Blue Stillness, looking into his eyes through his gold-rimmed spectacles with the tenderness of a loving father.

"Toujours—always. I'm not too late, am I?"

"Oh, no," smiled the Maker. "People are not in a hurry to come to me as a rule."

It seemed to Mironoff that there was a touch of reproachful sadness in His voice.

"Oui," he agreed, feeling that his blue thoughts and words were slipping from him. Anxiety gripped his heart, the fear that he would not have time to say all he wanted.

"No, they are in no hurry. They marry 'fine girls'—like Fimas and Serafimas, damn them—Pardon! They live like dogs, you know, quite shameless. Then they bear children, eat soaked apples, and they're so greedy, so terribly greedy.

As far as I'm concerned, as you must know, I ask for nothing. The ordinary God, *their* God, pays no attention to them. It's the carpenter who orders their lives—well, you know all that. You know it was I who first found out the carpenter. He is the demon of trifles, of noise and excitement, the Devil of Bustle. It was he who invented drunkenness, soaked apples, marriages, fish pies, gambling, everything that I dislike and don't want . . .”

At the thought of the accursed carpenter, Mironoff screamed with anger, but the Maker of the Blue Stillness took him gently with one hand and, turning over the leaves of His Book of Laws with the other, asked him softly:

“Are you often subject to headaches?”

“Head? La tête?”

He remembered the French word and, putting up his hands, felt his head. It was smooth and cold like a globe.

“We're told it hangs suspended in space . . .”

He recalled this phrase as he pressed his head between his palms, murmured it in a whisper, and began singing plaintively:

“Siskin, Siskin,  
Where have you been?”

“Did you add much to it?” I enquired of Dr. Alexander Alexin, after he had told me the story of this man's case.

“You, of course, would have added more,” he answered with a smile.\* “The story was told me by a colleague who was treating Mironoff's arm. Mironoff threw himself out of the window when he caught sight of the carpenter who had come to visit him at the hospital. And a few days ago, I met Mironoff again. He had come to consult me—slight touch of bronchitis. We remembered each other. He's a man you can't help remembering—an unforgettable type. I think he's something of a knave though he pulls a long face at the world. He owns the book-binding shop on the Morskaia . . .”

Konstantin Dmitrievitch Mironoff peered with a dark and dreary eye at the bottom of his glass where he had discovered a still undissolved piece of sugar. Carefully scraping it out

\* Author's Note: I believe I did.

with his spoon, he put it into his mouth and, passing his tongue over his bristly whiskers, sighed deeply.

"Yes," he said, "that was a fine case of sprained mind. Well, shall we get down to business now?"

He picked up a pencil with his long, bony fingers and began adding up on a scrap of paper.

"Considering that you have been recommended by the highly esteemed Dr. Alexin, and that you are in the same line of business as I am, well . . . I shall charge you . . . for the leather and cloth . . . Is that too much? Not at all. It's no more than it's worth."

He explained to me in detail all about prices, the whims of the workmen, the taxes and various other things to convince me of his disinterested services. As he spoke, he stroked his bumpy, shaved, tartar skull with the palm of his hand. His long ears stuck out like the handles of a travelling bag. His large nose nestled in the wiry hairs of his trimmed moustache. His cheek-bones moved strangely, and he spoke in a dull and colourless, hoarse voice. It seemed that he was chewing or sucking his words. The room was small and stuffy and filled with the scent of leather, glue and machine oil. Somewhere in the corner over the bookcase a fly was reluctantly dying.

"Tell me," I asked, "how did you become conscious that reason was returning to your brain?"

The fingers of his right hand with their black nails were crawling firmly along the table, moving the papers. Glancing with a dull slanting eye at the corner where the fly was dying, he answered almost grudgingly:

"You see, I'd almost forgotten all about it until the doctor forced me to remember. It's really not interesting and I'm somewhat ashamed of it. It's humiliating to think that other people go crazy in a clever way: they imagine they are kings, for instance, or animals; something either very grand, or at least funny, muddles their brain, whereas, in my case, it was just foolishness. There was an engineer at the asylum who thought he was a chess-knight. He was always jumping either to the right or the left of the door, and could never go through it. But when the doctor there told me I thought he was God, I was really very grieved to hear it, though he was a decent chap. Still . . ."

"How about the carpenter?"

"Oh, he died, of course, though not so long ago—some four years. I was already here. I've been here nine years because of my weak chest. He had become a regular drunkard at the end. I had to take him to court. He took it upon himself to look after my property while I was ill—eleven months that was—and made such a mess of it! He was really insane, like these poets and writers here. . . ."

He pointed in the direction of a book of which he was repairing the binding. Then, coughing and passing his hand over his throat:

"Yes, yes," he continued. "I read books when I have time. Usually before going to sleep. No, books have no effect on me. Besides, writers seem to have nothing interesting to say nowadays. It's all about love—as though everybody needed *that*! A certain knowledge of French is useful for the backs—I bind many French books. Well, then, we're agreed: thirteen volumes in full leather. The Bible will cost you more, though; it's a fat volume. Why is it that you are so interested in the carpenter?" he asked, as though slightly offended, and continued in his drowsy manner:

"He was an ordinary individual who deserved his fate. He had made up his mind that I should marry his niece and that was why he led me such a life, already looking on my property as his own. I got him in a proper tight corner, I may say, with my father-in-law, Rosanoff. He owed Rosanoff a great deal, too, for timber."

As I listened to the reluctant tale I was seized with a passionate desire to drive Mironoff crazy again. But he went on, politely coughing:

"Lisaveta Ivanovna died. She gave birth to a stillborn girl and followed her. I married again—a local young woman. Yes, thank you, I lead a peaceful life. Although her mother is a Greek, she turned out to be perfectly respectable. To tell you the truth, it wasn't so peaceful with the first: she was subject to whims and tears and had an altogether difficult nature. And pious, you have no idea! It was ridiculous, if you don't mind my saying so. Crosses and ikons all about her, and talking of nothing but miracles. She was afraid of death, too. . . ."

He coughed, wrinkled up his forehead and added in a didactic tone:

"As though there was anything to be afraid of! One should remember the Cossack proverb, 'While I am here there is no death, and when death comes, I shan't be here!' Very true. And you might add, 'You will not die before your death.'"

He smiled, showing a neat death-like row of false teeth.

"On my Saint's Day, will you believe it, Lisaveta Ivanovna gave me a ring representing a skull. To me, who loathe human bones! She was a fantastic person, almost mad. After she died I had to bring a suit against her father on account of the dowry. He was a very highly respected citizen, it is true, but really too greedy. . . . Shall we finish our business? 'Don Quixote' in two volumes. Leather? Don't try to make me reduce the price. Remember, the story of my temporary misfortune may be useful to you."

"Are you reckoning that in the bill?"

"Why not?" he asked, with some surprise. "Everything should be reckoned. Life demands precision; he who obeys her in that is favoured by the Goddess of Fortune. . . ."

"No," I reflected, "nothing and nobody can possibly drive Mironoff mad again." Aloud I asked him, "Have you still got your globe?"

Stroking the back of his head and glancing at the scrap of paper with figures before him, he answered:

"The carpenter, I believe, started to mend it once, but all he did was smash the music. . . ."





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